

**LISTENING TO VOICES:  
STORIED MOMENTS OF A CHANGING TEACHER IDENTITY INSIDE SHARED SPACES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The objective for this program of research was to retrospectively, narratively, and autobiographically examine how my professional identity shifted when I moved from the secret, safe space of my own classrooms to shared spaces with other teachers as a newly appointed Differentiated Instruction Facilitator. In education today, teachers increasingly share their classroom spaces with other professionals and often the shifts in identity of the people sharing spaces are not examined. In this inquiry, I examine my own identity by viewing the metaphorical dance floor of the Differentiated Instruction Project from both my position on the dance floor and from the balcony above. I inquire into the nature of my dancing relationships with many partners over two years on my middle and secondary school landscape and how these relationships changed how I understood myself as a teacher and as a facilitator. I look at the differentiated philosophy I was expected to deliver and the knowledge my colleagues brought into our time together and how these two knowledge realms interacted and shifted my own knowledge and, in turn, my relationships with my teacher partners and their students.

My professional identity within the Differentiated Instruction Project shifted often. In the beginning, I attempted to integrate voices of the conduit and their system and sacred stories with my own personal practical knowledge. In this inquiry, I explore the relationship between the conduit and my work inside classroom spaces. I inquire into the effect of stories on my own personal practical knowledge and the knowledge of my colleagues and their students. I examine the ways in which many dancers were positioned on my educational dance floor and the ways in which these voices shaped the voice of my identity. Finally, I imagine possibilities for living and reliving and then telling and retelling stories of shifting identities within shared spaces.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Cue the music

*You know, if I really think about this identity business, it occurs to me that I haven't thought enough about it at all. My brain worries back into the past and propels forward into the future. I go back and try to recall where my identity started at the beginning of this year, or at the beginning of last year. I look ahead to where it is going. Identity is such a wisp of a thing, a shadow, an illusion. I am shaped every day, if only slightly. The only things that are rooted at my core are my experiences so far and the lessons they have taught me. I hang onto them, hoping they'll help me predict and function and cope. But even those experiences, when examined under a microscope, are filled with moving, complex bits. We are only our moment, our now. Anything can happen. (personal journal, 2008)*

There are times when you come face-to-face with a part of yourself you do not recognize and you cannot ignore what you see. For two impactful years of my career, I stared into my own heart and learned there was more hiding there than I knew. My transformative journey of change and growth was complex, because I needed to share a space with others before I was able to see myself. By living and then telling and retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) meaningful, joyful, and startling “spotlight” moments with my colleagues and our students, I was able to discover parts of myself that forever changed who I am as a teacher. These moments, as I navigated a fluctuating landscape of shared spaces with “diverse people, things, and events in different relationships” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 4) became mirrors to greater understanding about what is most important to me in the midst of change. Palmer (1998) captured the significance of this reflection, “If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject” (p. 2).

Living and feeling these stories has been the key to my growth. Orr and Olson (2007)



clarified, “As we tell and retell such stories, and come to a deeper awareness of how we shape and are shaped by these moments and our multiple understandings of them, we realize the transformative possibilities they provoke” (Orr & Olson, 2007, p. 820). As I repeated my stories to those around me and again in my research, I came to a deeper awareness of the influence of my stories on my identity and on future choices I make. My stories are about transformation provoked by living, perceiving, feeling, and reflecting. Borrowing an observation from Richardson (2000), “Some stories were painful and took an interminable length of time to write, but writing them loosened their shadow hold on me” (p. 932). Now, as I move into a future of more change, I realize I am a different teacher and a different person than I was.

### **Before I really danced for a living**

*Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. (Palmer, 1998, p. 2)*

After 16 years in the teaching profession, I thought I would have my identity polished. I would not have guessed that, for me, as time progressed, I would feel I have more and more to learn every day. I thought I would know it all by now.

I remember my first teaching position. I was offered the job three days before the school year started and one day after I got back from my second backpacking tour of Europe. I was not even sure I wanted to teach right away. I had half imagined I would go back to university and get another degree. I accepted, despite the position being in grade six when my training was in secondary art and English. I bulldozed my way through unit plans and classroom preparations. I only marginally considered how I was making decisions. Needless to say, I entered into my

profession on very unsteady legs and with a philosophy almost as unsteady.

Fast forward 14 years, another town and many teaching assignments later. By the time I accepted the job of Differentiated Instruction (DI) Facilitator at a middle and secondary school, I was feeling pretty seasoned. I had just rolled off a vice-principalship and was feeling ready for other challenges.

I enrolled in my Master of Education program and dove into the new DI position. These decisions would change the way I view my profession, the people working within my profession, and the students we try to teach every day. Perhaps more significant was that these decisions would change the way I viewed myself within my own school's landscape and within a larger educational setting. I was nowhere near ready for the DI job or the shifts in my identity that would come with it. The combination of the way it unfolded and the changes I was undergoing in my core beliefs about education, through my university courses, resulted in work that forever altered the way I understood myself as a professional educator in my continually changing educational landscape.

### **Dancing alone and dancing with others**

In the spring of 2007, I read a book that provided me with a framework of understanding into which I was easily able to place images of experiences I had and things I came to know about teaching and learning, but was unable to articulate. *Teachers' Professional Knowledge Landscapes* by Clandinin and Connelly (1995) explored the idea of secret teacher stories in safe classroom spaces and sacred knowledge in out-of-classroom spaces for educators. "These are two fundamentally different places on the landscape, the one behind the classroom door with students, and the other in professional places with others" (p. 5). Clandinin and Connelly

asserted that teachers' experiences of existing between two spaces often create feelings of dissonance. The private space of the classroom is a safe place, where teachers can develop their own stories, free of scrutiny by other adults. Although this space is shared with students, there is an unspoken understanding that most of what occurs within that space will be protected knowledge between the teacher and the students.

Further, because of the authority given teachers by the nature of their position, there is little opportunity for questioning, reflecting, and general discourse about what happens in these safe classroom spaces unless initiated by the teachers themselves. Once teachers move into spaces outside the safety of their classrooms, they are often inclined to develop cover stories, "...stories in which they portray themselves as characters who are certain, expert people" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 15). Teachers are very hesitant to show their vulnerability away from their safe classroom spaces.

This language of secret stories in safe spaces and cover stories in out-of-classroom spaces (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) immediately spoke to me about the work I was doing and the things I was seeing within the landscape of my own school. I was moving in and out of various classrooms, planning and team-teaching with a variety of teachers in varied classroom settings. I began to wonder what was happening for my colleagues in terms of how they understood themselves and their work when I began to share their spaces during our DI collegial time together. Moving into their rooms seemed to involve a risk, as they agreed to share their fears, their strengths and their concerns for how well they were teaching and even who they were as teachers. As we opened curricula, some teachers allowed themselves to admit frustration with the documents and a fractured understanding of objectives. Teachers discussed their dependence on textbooks and tried-and-true activities as opposed to the curricula. They began to express an

honest desire to better understand how and when their students were learning. Discussing how to differentiate for the students in their classes was challenging work for both them and me. As I gently moved us into territory that was new, I wondered whether they felt threatened by becoming part of a shared space or whether they embraced the challenge, and what influenced either response to occur.

I also began to question how my presence in classrooms affected the students who lived there every day. Did the work I was doing impact their learning as I hoped it would? Did differentiated instruction invite them to share their thoughts and beliefs more clearly? Did their voices influence decisions their teachers and I were making? Was this change to *their* safe space welcome? How did the students fit into my understanding of my work?

As I thought further, I began to wonder how my own identity changed when, during the day, I moved from safe spaces in my classrooms into the shared spaces co-constructed by my colleagues, their students, and me. In addition to my role as DI Facilitator, I taught classes on my own and I began to consider whether moving from safe spaces to shared spaces was, in fact, changing how I understood myself as a teacher and, in turn, whether this change was the same for every teacher. I also began to wonder how I prepared for this move from one space to another and whether my preparations were a function of how I understood myself. Lastly, I began to wonder if truly effective shared spaces with other teachers and their students eventually developed an element of secrecy—shared secrecy about the work we were doing. While I wanted my colleagues to share their successes with others in order to encourage my presence in other classrooms, I wondered if our actual shared time together became secret in some ways.

Dancing beyond the wonderings I had about myself, the teachers I worked with, and my position as a whole were the questions I had about the impact of the greater body of knowledge

and theory I came into contact with over the two years in my position. The readings I did to prepare for my new job and the information I was being given by the facilitators of my program also shifted my understanding of myself and the work I was doing.

I believe it will be necessary, in telling my stories, to articulate the theory of differentiated instruction, and further, to describe how knowledge of this philosophy was intended to be disseminated to the teachers on my educational landscape. Many decisions about the Project and how it was going to function were made outside my own school landscape and I initially served as the receiver of this information through a conduit (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) which flowed from the facilitators of our DI Project and the literature we were required to read. This movement through the conduit was often quite forceful and I struggled, at times, to quickly comprehend the information being piped to me before I was expected to do something with it. Later I became an extension of the conduit through which the information I received about differentiation, teaching, and learning was passed on to my colleagues. I often struggled with the speed with which I was expected to pass on this information. I felt the force of the conduit message and I tried to hold it long enough to understand and believe in it before passing it on to others. I did not wish to simply be a receiver and then a transmitter of the knowledge being delivered through the conduit. I sensed that in order for the information to truly influence change on my school landscape, learning needed to be a priority and learning was about more than knowledge transmission. I was very aware of my multi-faceted role as receiver and transmitter, and later as learner and teacher, within this project. The complexity of these dimensions added to my identity-shaping and my understanding of how I functioned within my school and at a divisional level.

As a result of exploring the ideas of Clandinin and Connelly, and connecting with them

so strongly, I chose to adopt their language and apply it in a slightly different way to my own unique situation. This research explores stories of how my personal and professional identities were shifted by moving from the safe spaces I enjoyed within my own classrooms to the shared spaces I co-constructed with my colleagues and their students as a DI Facilitator. The language of Clandinin and Connelly invited me to clarify for myself the difference between my life as a classroom teacher and my experiences as a DI Facilitator.

### **Complex choreography**

In an attempt to understand the context in which I found myself, it is necessary from time to time to move to the balcony and survey the dance hall of activity in my school division and in the province. In the spring of 2006, my newly amalgamated school division was faced with a quandary. There was a push toward a completely inclusive model for education, wherein “pull-outs” and resource rooms would cease to exist. This left educational associates, who traditionally worked one-on-one with assigned students in spaces outside the students’ home classrooms, with an unclear role in this new setting. Further, teachers asserted they were ill-equipped to handle the increasingly demanding role of meeting the needs of all students in their classes under these conditions. In this context, the School Division decided to make a bold move toward a very specific initiative: the Differentiated Instruction Project. This project was designed to provide time for teachers who were knowledgeable about differentiating instruction (Tomlinson, 1999) to work in classrooms with other teachers, in order to provide support in maximizing the learning opportunities for all learners within the classroom setting.

Though perhaps not a new idea in larger educational landscapes, this was certainly breaking new ground within the Division—and the first order of business was to find schools in

which to pilot the project. The second, and more important, business was to identify instructionally skilful teachers who could successfully “sell” this kind of educational model within their schools. Seven schools were selected and eight teachers recruited to take on this project in a part-time capacity. It was from these teachers, from the divisional leaders in charge of the project, and from the literature in which they all immersed themselves, that the DI Project in my School Division was formed.

There can be no doubt that the people who created the role of DI Facilitator did not envision the job as it functions today. In fact, the job today will not be the job tomorrow. It changes every day, in every school where it now occurs in my Division. The group leaders admit to an incomplete vision in the beginning, and, as a result, we first-year DI Facilitators had to forge our own path with far less guidance than we might have wished.

Creating a new position in my educational setting jump-started simultaneous negotiations in my professional identity. I was no longer a single teacher functioning in the safe space of my classroom. Now I was moving into other teachers’ spaces. I was the bearer of new ideas, of new ways to plan and teach—and this was a very different position to be in.

As the first year progressed, I began to see my experiences through the lens of a dance metaphor. As more and more people asked about the work I was doing, I found myself struggling to articulate the complex dynamic of this work in a simple way. I often felt indulgent when I launched into detailed explanations and I often sensed I was losing people in rhetoric and complexity. I spent time trying to simplify the explanation of my work for both myself and others. I began to realize the complexity of my job reminded me of the complexity of experiences I have had in the world of dance. Having been immersed in dance in various forms in my life, and knowing others would be familiar with the notions of partnerships with variety

and intricacy in dance, I began to develop the idea of dance as a metaphoric representation of my DI work.

I imagined my school landscape as a dance hall—a place where people go, night after night, to listen to music and take part in dance steps with which they become increasingly familiar. Many factors shape the evening for the patrons. Music, lights and food are all part of the atmosphere created each night for the dancers. What exactly happens in this dance setting in a single evening, however, is difficult to break down into its many relational parts. Nevertheless, the same synergy that seems to flow in this situation is much like the flow I experienced within my school setting in my DI role. In both cases, the complexity is hard to explain but strangely simple to understand when viewed as a whole.

The dance metaphor invites the notion of knowledge that is transferable across generations, cultures, experiences, and partnerships. Like teaching, dance is both felt and thought. It implies a shared experience rich in nuances but, at the same time, understood by many. In the words of Bateson (1994), “A metaphor goes on generating ideas and questions, so that a metaphorical approach to the world is endlessly fertile and involves constant learning. A good metaphor continues to instruct” (p. 135). I understood I was dancing with different partners all of the time, sometimes four in a single day. Each partner brought his or her own knowledge and skills to our newly formed partnership. Some knew the steps for just one dance, while others had learned many complex dances in their careers. My job was to discover which steps they knew and which they wanted, and sometimes needed, to learn.

Sometimes I followed their lead, yet at other times I switched into the lead role. During my time on the dance floor of my educational landscape, I had moments when the spotlight seemed to be shining on my partner and me, and these are some of the moments I needed to



explore further. Other times, I found myself on the balcony, looking down at others dancing, trying to get a sense of where we were all going and what we were all doing and learning. This dance metaphor provided me with comfort because it illustrated the complexity of the task I was undertaking. It also gave some structure to my sense of who I was in this grand dance and who I was hoping to become.

### **Where listening to voices began**

It was under these conditions of continual change, unclear direction, and a strong need to feel confident I was leading people through the right dance steps that feedback from teachers and students with whom I worked became a daily quest as part of my personal and professional mission. I began to depend on feedback as one of the tools I used to mould my identity as a DI Facilitator. Coelho (2006) asserted the importance of this endeavour, “I saw things that are never absolute, they depend on each individual’s perceptions. And the best way to know who we are is often to find out how others see us” (p. 14). This search for feedback was my need and my plan—to find out what others thought about my work and the message I was trying to deliver.

My role as a DI Facilitator was complex. I planned units with teachers. I discussed philosophy, and I examined curricular objectives. I facilitated the formation of big ideas and big questions (Tomlinson, 1999), and talked deeply with teachers about their assessment practices. Together, we began a journey of experimentation that continued into their classrooms. We taught together, and we reflected daily on our successes and failures. As I changed and refined this process, I became more comfortable with my role. While in the beginning I struggled with my identity as a DI Facilitator, I later became comfortable with aspects of this new skin.

As a result of increased security in understanding my role and an increasingly developed

DI identity, I was able to move forward, with my colleagues, through a process of experimentation and reflection. Together we came to know the students—through observations, pre-assessments, flexible groupings, discussions, and a myriad of other ways to engage in a dialogue of learning. As my own identity became more secure, I found myself moving into a quest for a student-centered approach to learning. As Rodgers (2002) asserted, “...student learning should guide teaching. Teachers’ classroom practice must be seen as an integrated, focused response to student learning rather than a checklist of teaching behaviours” (p. 233). Rodgers asserted that feedback in its various formats provides us with a basis for our decisions about instruction. We might consider asking what students know, and how they know it, before we can fully attempt to meet their learning needs. This emphasis fit well with knowledge and beliefs I developed through the course of my career before I became a DI Facilitator.

### **Spotlight moment: Understanding our partners**

*I thought if I didn’t remind them of the test every day, they would forget to study. I wanted them to do well, so I warned them of the pitfalls of not studying a little each day. I emphasized the difficulty of the upcoming exam, sure I was doing the right thing.*

*The exam came and went. Some students did well and others did not. There were no real surprises, and I moved on to the new unit.*

*When interview time arrived, I was pleased to welcome the father of one of my students into the room. The student, the father, and I sat in a semi-circle and worked our way through the twenty-minute time slot, with the student competently leading us through her information sheets and portfolio. At the end of our time together, the father asked if he could speak with me alone. Immediately frowning with concern, I agreed and the child left to sit in the hallway.*

*The father asked me why I spent so much time worrying my students about exams. I was unsure how to answer, so he continued. He explained that when I built up the importance of my tests and continually warned the students about the difficulty they could expect, his daughter then came home in the evenings so filled with worry she was unable to study properly. He clarified that his daughter cared a great deal about what I thought of her and the marks she achieved. He asked that I not build up the exams to such a degree in the future. I immediately agreed, and he left.*

That moment has never left me because it is representative of a time when I realized the power of the stories my students bring to our shared interactions. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) described the importance of retelling a story like this one, “It is when we ask ourselves the meaning of a story, and tell it in a narrative, that we reconstruct the meaning recovered in the story” (p. 81). From this experience, I realized not all students respond to my instruction in the same way. I learned to consider the needs of the various people in my classroom space. Even more importantly, I learned that if I have moments when I am not sure of how my instruction has impacted my students, I ask them. This practice of seeking feedback as a springboard for examining my practice has served me well over my years of teaching. However, the conclusions I have reached as a result, have not always been straightforward.

While I still believe the process of seeking feedback is successful in facilitating change and increasing student learning, there were many days when I chose to ask for feedback and then questioned the long-term effects I was having. My personal communication style and my preferences for certain classroom practices demanded of me a recognition that this style and these preferences were not always shared by my colleagues, and, furthermore, were not always appreciated by all students. This caused me to question the effect I, as a facilitator, had on

teacher practice and, in turn, on student learning. There was no doubt the questions I had about my overall effectiveness were a recurring challenge of my job, and were a complicating factor in negotiating a changing identity.

However, at the end of my second year as a DI Facilitator, I felt more secure in my understanding of many aspects of my practice. I carved out a personal direction and approach to my job. I established a rapport with many teachers on my staff and with many, if not most, students. I felt humbled by the influence I had over the shifting practices in the classrooms in which I worked. Sometimes, I even imagined a time when I was no longer unsure of my knowledge and skills. This was exactly when my spotlight moments occurred—moments that demanded I sit up and take notice.

These were the tension-filled, identity-shaping stories that provided a large dose of reality and humility, along with smatterings of hope and confidence I was heading in the right direction, and a renewed vision of where I might turn my energies. These were the moments that opened up the sides of my existing identity framework and allowed new colours and images to flow in, and old, tired understandings to flow out. Just when I thought I had mastered a dance, something shifted and I found myself searching for the beat of the music once again.

### **Spotlight moment of a new dance partner: Helen's classroom<sup>1</sup>**

*I felt like an intruder the day I slipped into Helen's classroom. I almost stopped at the door, but I pressed forward, silently reminding myself I had walked into other classrooms, unannounced, many times before. I needed to feel free to come and go, I told myself. Soon I*

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect the identities of characters in this inquiry. Further, other identifying features such as gender and teaching assignment may have been changed for the same purpose.

would be a fixture in this room and the students and Helen needed to be familiar with my presence.

*I could feel the shift in the room in the minute it took me to tiptoe through the darkness to the shelf where we were storing materials for our upcoming unit on Everyday Heroes. I felt an immediate tension from Helen as soon as I began to cross the room. I mumbled an apology and a brief explanation of my intent, and Helen quickly turned her attention back to the overhead she was showing her health class. However, my presence was not ignored and, before I could slip back out of the door, Helen invited me to share in the contents of the overhead with the students.*

*I knew Helen had been exploring identity with her classes in health. In fact, we had both attended a social event the previous weekend where the topic of her unit, and birth order as part of that, had come up. As a group of adults, we had spent some time discussing how we felt birth order had influenced our lives.*

*The overhead she was sharing with her class dealt with traits of first-borns and what students might expect of a teacher who is a first-born. The students were silent as their teacher talked them through the content. Helen knew I was the eldest in my family and as she read through the information aloud, I remember being surprised at the traits of a first-born teacher as they were listed. To me, they seemed rigid, uncompromising and not at all like the story I had woven of myself as a teacher.*

*Helen was also a first-born and as she read aloud, she took moments to agree with the content as it related to herself. She reminded students that she, indeed, needed order. She liked the students to be quiet and she had high expectations for them. She seemed relaxed and enjoying the opportunity to share part of herself with her students.*

*When she was finished, she turned to me and asked if I related to any of the information*

*she had just read. Without pausing for thought, I stated that the descriptors did not seem like me. At that moment, a student, whom I had instructed the year before, said, “It’s true. That’s not like Mrs. White at all. She’s fun!”*

*In that moment, I felt pride, shame, and guilt wash over me. I felt pleased, of course, that a student would categorize me as fun and agree that the stern traits presented on the overhead were not at all like me. More so, though, I felt ashamed because my initially uninvited presence in the room had led to an awkward moment of comparison between Helen and me.*

The relationship between Helen and me was not supposed to end up where we were on that day. We had agreed to work together under the premise of exploring differentiated practices in one of her classes. We had planned together for six hours and had created a Heroes unit for her English class. We had designed many opportunities for the two of us to experiment with our teaching and for students to experiment with their learning. I sensed discomfort from Helen on a few occasions during our planning session, but she seemed to suspend her questions and anxiety for the time being.

I knew from our discussions and from observing a number of lessons in her room that we had different teaching styles and even some different philosophies. Our time together had been a dance of deep questions and attempts at open discussion, but I felt Helen was “going with the flow” largely because she felt she had to. I knew she had received encouragement from the administration to examine some of her teaching practices and I imagined she felt she had to “go along” with my suggestions to relieve some of the pressure she was feeling. Our relationship was difficult to manoeuvre because I knew I needed her to trust me and to feel able to be open with me, but I felt she came into our time together under duress, so this would be no easy task.

Following our planning sessions, she stated she would not feel comfortable telling me if

she felt things were not going well as we began to team-teach. She said she would be afraid of hurting my feelings. Even when I clarified the necessity of honest feedback in order for me to grow as a DI Facilitator, she firmly stated she would not do so, and furthermore, she also did not want feedback from me about her instruction because she, “Just didn’t want to know” (personal journal, 2008). She was expressing a need to stumble and experiment privately. She did not want to share this process with me.

I felt it would be necessary to attempt to negotiate this opinion further as we progressed. I knew our relationship would be strained and largely unproductive if she continued to feel she could not be open with me. In order to begin to gain her trust and invite an honest and collaborative relationship from time to time at least, I felt I needed to articulate my own questions and doubts about my teaching. I hoped that by my showing honest vulnerability, she would feel more able to take the risk of trying new things with me in the room.

Within my role, I often felt I could not describe to other teachers how my knowing, learning, and growth translated into relationships with my students. My own classroom and the secret stories that occurred there remained part of a safe space between my students and me, rather than a space I shared with my colleagues. As a result, I felt a strong division between my own personal practical knowledge, or knowledge I gained about my teaching practice through both theory and personal experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), and the conditions surrounding the knowledge development I was trying to facilitate for others. My personal practical knowledge was “a changing landscape with a history of its own” (p. 28) and I saw that history as different from the history I was creating with my colleagues.

On that day with Helen, I was attempting to build a bridge between Helen’s safe space where she could live out her secret stories and a shared space that would be occupied by both of

us in the coming weeks. The safe space of my own classrooms and my own relationships with the students I taught got in the way. While I was standing in Helen's room that day, I felt literally trapped between two worlds: the world of sharing ideas and experiences I lived as a DI Facilitator and the secret world I lived as a classroom teacher. I realized my two separate worlds did not mix very often and I preferred it that way.

When I entered a classroom as a DI Facilitator, even when I had taught the students at a previous time, I was there in a different role. My behaviour was different and my presence was different under the new context. Part of my role as a DI Facilitator was to encourage conditions where a teacher's safe space became a shared space where trust and caring were fostered. Therefore, I was uncomfortable when students interacted with me in a too-familiar way because it might have told my colleague something about me as a teacher I was not yet willing to share. I feared if I revealed too much of whom I was in my own safe space, it would jeopardize the work we were doing in our shared space.

On that day, in Helen's classroom, I felt a moment when the students began to respond to my presence with the familiarity of our roles in our previous safe classroom space—and it seemed to mean awkwardness for Helen in our shared space. I imagined her frustration at having me walk into her classroom unannounced. Then I imagined her dismay when I did not relate to the information she was presenting. Finally, I could feel the pause of discomfort when one of her students made his statement about me. I guessed that our already strained relationship further deteriorated in her mind. I imagined she felt my stated insecurities were lies and she predicted our time together would be filled with judgement and criticism.

Furthermore, this tension was complicated by my understanding of Helen's desire to protect her secret stories in her safe classroom space. Just as I craved to keep my safe spaces



secret from Helen, so did she from me. I was perhaps asking something of Helen that I was not willing to share myself. I moved between feeling frustrated and empathetic throughout my time in her room.

Somehow, I knew the doubts raised by her imagined voice were important to my growth. In the words of Bateson (1994), “Out of that tense multiplicity of vision came the possibility for insight” (p. 6). Nevertheless, the insight came later and the questions and doubt of her imagined voice played in my head and bothered me for many days.

### **Stories under the spotlight**

*She finds herself not mirrored—but in difference. In difference, she cannot simply identify with herself or with those she teaches. In the space she explores between self and other, nothing looks familiar; everything looks a little unnatural. (Miller, 2005, p. 224)*

This spotlight moment with Helen was a single moment in a two-year period rich with experiences and revelations. It was a moment I almost ignored as being important. Part of the process of this research was to unscramble, isolate, and contextualize moments such as this one with Helen. I had to literally force myself to refrain from filing it away as inconsequential. Over the course of the day, following this moment, I allowed myself the time to wrestle with my conflicted feelings. I needed to really work apart that moment in Helen’s classroom, and try to figure out what was going on beneath the surface.

I suspect this moment has been forgotten by Helen. I suspect she has not given it another thought because we built many layers of experience on top of this beginning story. Nevertheless, I felt a need to slow things down and worry this moment a little—clean off the dirt of cover stories and ego and daily stimulus, and see what was underneath. I wanted to contemplate the

significance of this moment in order to better understand myself. Orr and Olson (2007) articulated my feelings, “Not until later...did I understand the importance of this moment for me as a researcher and as a teacher. I knew I had bumped against something, but did not know what until later when I was away...” (p. 825). I had clearly bumped against something and interestingly, that something was me.

### **Who is leading? Who is following?**

Zembylas (2003) discussed the nature of identity by writing:

Identity consists of what we know best about our relations to self, others, and the world, yet it is often constituted by the things we are least able to talk about. Identity is grounded in multiple ways of knowing, with affective and direct experiential knowledge often being paramount. (p. 112)

Many of my identity-shaping spotlight moments in my research are about the internal voices I listen to so attentively. These are the voices I imagine coming from my colleagues, my administrators, my fellow Differentiated Instruction Facilitators, and my students. These voices gave rise to self-reflection, self-criticism, and self-affirmation. In this research, I explore the power of these voices on my changing identity because, as Ornstein (2003) wrote, “A successful teacher first understands and accepts himself, then understands and accepts others” (p. 79).

A large part of my identity is closely linked to being a “good teacher,” and my examination of my spotlight moments propelled me further into understanding what the phrase “good teacher” meant to me. Greene (1995) stated the importance of this exploration when she wrote, “In some strange way, by grasping them, by making them objects of my experience, I have imposed my own order, my own context, as I have pursued my own adventures into

meaning” (Greene, 1995, p. 85).

My spotlight moments are not always so hidden behind the daily glare of my DI existence. Sometimes these moments hit me full on and I have no choice but to pay attention. Bateson (1994) articulated this kind of moment when she wrote, “Indeed, what I have seen and heard would not have pushed me to reflection and generalization were it not for the urgency produced by a sense of difference” (p. 17). Dissecting these obvious spotlight moments is no less complicated. Meanings and understandings can often be masked by assumptions, defensiveness, and self-preservation, and it is important to retell these stories over and over again to arrive at personal significance. Polkinghorne (1988) stated, “Narrative meaning consists of more than the events alone; it consists also of the significance these events have for the narrator in relation to a particular theme” (p. 160). I wanted to consider whether my often emotional spotlight moments resulted in shifts in my identity or whether they served to strengthen beliefs I already held.

My inquiry is about understanding my personal and professional identity. I examined my understanding of who I was as a person in relation to the work I did. I reflected on my first two years as a Differentiated Instruction Facilitator and explored why my teaching identity and, in turn, my personal identity, shifted as my stories occurred and then were unpacked in my attempt to grow as a professional and to understand my feelings of both success and setback. I attempted to understand why I categorized certain stories in terms of success or setback and how this categorization impacted the work that followed. I described my dance into becoming a “teacher as knower” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 1); a person who attempted to understand my knowing of myself, my work, my students, my teaching and my learning, and, ultimately, how these many aspects of myself were connected and how they played out on the dance floor.

### **View from the balcony**

*Perception, attention, grace, all of these, varied or sustained, provide materials for constructing both self and world, and patterns for joining in the dance. (Bateson, 1994, p. 235)*

Again, in order to look closely at the spotlight moments, I will back away from the action and examine things from the balcony. Individual moments in our day always occur within a larger context, and this context must find its place in the stories in order for the stories to be fairly explored. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) wrote, “In effect, stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history” (p. 415). When I tell my spotlight moment stories, I must first tell the stories of context that frame the events. Bateson (1995) concurred when she stated, “These are all ways of learning, by encountering and comparing more than one version of experience, that the realities of self and world are relative, dependant on context and point of view” (p. 12). Therefore, from time to time, I step back and clarify how I came to my spotlight moments and why I placed so much importance on the voices from others, in determining my own identity.

### **Audience response**

*One must see from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is happening if one is to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face. (Greene, 1995, p.10)*

A key catalyst in my changing identity during my two years as a DI Facilitator was feedback, both formal and informal, from others who shared my landscapes. Receiving honest feedback required a great deal of inner fortitude. Accessing responses and reflections from

people immersed in a changing landscape was, at times, like exposing a wound. Even so, by listening to the stories of students and teachers, I made some fairly large-scale changes in my professional practice and identity.

Listening to many voices and the stories they tell is crucial to determining how change is altering all the people involved. School divisions across Saskatchewan and throughout Canada are continually searching for the “perfect solution”; the thing that will ensure quality professional development, and, as a result, will improve learner outcomes. In the process of forging ahead to introduce initiatives designed to address these concerns, the individual person’s experience within the educational context is often forgotten. Students, teachers, administrators, and facilitators all have a myriad of responses to these mandated alterations to instructional practices, as well as a myriad of influences that affect these responses. It is worth considering that in order to evaluate the effectiveness of a change in practice, an examination of this change’s effect on individuals within the system should be undertaken. Sometimes it is a mistake to generalize effectiveness by looking simply at learner outcomes; however they may be measured or assessed. By asking for feedback from students and teachers with whom I worked, I was, in effect, examining very personal stories amid change in educational practice. By listening to many voices inside stories, those who design and facilitate the DI Project may be able to learn something about how change initiatives are experienced and shifted by people who are dancing to this differentiated choreography.

As education expands and shifts, more and more often teachers are asked to share their safe classroom spaces with others. Diversity consultants, speech and language pathologists, and other professionals are moving into classrooms to offer support to teachers. Educational associates are working within classrooms to assist in inclusionary practices. Teachers are being

encouraged to plan together in Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004) and, in turn, to move into shared classroom spaces and work together. Classrooms are not always places where doors are closed and kept that way for the entire day. As spaces are increasingly shared, shifts occur in teacher practice, and ultimately, teacher identity. Just as my own identity shifted in my two years in shared spaces, I imagine the identities of my colleagues changed. Any person who works in a shared space experiences the effects of working in the midst of varying philosophies and practices. These experiences require much self-examination. If, in education, we pay more attention to the processes affecting shifting identities and the ultimate results of these shifts, our plans for future shared space experiences can be enhanced and refined.

### **Dancing by listening**

*...imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty space between ourselves and those we teachers have called "other" over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through strangers' eyes and hear through their ears. (Greene, 1995, p. 3)*

To begin the process of self-examination and self-knowing, I began to reflect on feedback I received from both teachers and students. I found it useful, for my own growth, to consider it in one of four ways. First, there was the feedback that clearly supported the work I was doing and the system story I was delivering. This was the kind of information that told me I was headed in the right direction in my work, and it often fell into the various aspects of Differentiated Instruction that were the focus of my daily practice. This was the kind of feedback that served to strengthen my professional knowledge and beliefs and my belief in the sacred story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995)—the story of the necessity for change which I sensed

existed within the school division, the Project, and the work we were doing.

Examples of this kind of feedback were most often delivered verbally or more indirectly through observation of success for students. One teacher, after working with me for a couple of weeks commented that the best thing about my presence in her class was, “Having another set of eyes in the room and someone to bounce ideas off of every day.” She followed by saying, “Thank you, Katie. You make me feel so good” (personal journal, 2007). This type of feedback, given in passing, was often powerful because of its spontaneity. It confirmed my effectiveness for particular teachers and gave me confidence to move forward. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it clarified the condition of the relationship I was working so hard to develop. It offered me an understanding of my influence on others in our shared space and gave me much needed confidence to continue my work.

Next, there was feedback that clarified needs I should address either in my work with teachers, in my instruction of students, or in the professional reading and research that was part of my job. This was the kind of information that told me what I needed to focus on learning and foreshadowed aspects of my knowledge and beliefs that would change. This type of feedback had the most immediate impact on my professional identity.

One of the best examples of this variation of feedback occurred in my second year of DI work. As part of a project for a graduate class at the beginning of my second year, I was asked to interview students. I chose a focus group of four highly able students whose grasp of mathematics concepts was consistently strong. My time with these students, both in their classroom as a DI Facilitator and in our interview together, gave me many instances of the kind of feedback where my current understanding would be challenged.

I remember one discussion we had about their math class, when I introduced a technique

for encouraging metacognition. It required students to use coloured cards to identify their level of understanding of either the content or an assignment. I felt confident in this method to enable students to think about their own learning and to enable teachers to more readily meet the needs of students based on the colour students chose to represent their confidence. However, in our interview, the four students clarified difficulty with this approach. They stated, because they had a reputation for being intelligent, they would never feel comfortable displaying a red card—the card that symbolized difficulty or lack of understanding. As one student said, “They are good when you are doing your work and you say, ‘Stop, I need your help,’ but when you’re going through something on the overhead and she says, ‘Lift up your cards,’ and everybody sees it’s a red, they’re like (look of shock)” (transcript, October, 2007). This information was news to me and I had to alter the way in which I used this technique in classrooms. I no longer relied on the red card to inform me of difficulty. Instead, I more often used the yellow card to signal difficulty for these highly able students. Furthermore, I chose to use the cards primarily for independent work times, when using the cards would go largely unnoticed by peers.

Thirdly, there was feedback that seemed to resemble one of the first two kinds of feedback but included a complexity that, instead, gave me a mixed message in my interpretations and potential follow-up. For example, at times, students made statements that reinforced my positive effect on classroom activities. In my interview with the four students, one student stated, “Otherwise, if we were to joke around when you weren’t in there, we’d get detention. But when you come in, you joke around and everybody laughs...” (transcript, October, 2007). While I appreciated his observation that class time, when I was in the room, was enjoyable, I recognized it was creating a tension between them, their teacher, and me. I began to question whether the positive perception of me as a teacher, by the students, was actually making me effective in my



DI role. Not all positive comments about me were, in fact, positive for the development of the shared space needed for growth and change by my teacher partner. This was the kind of information that forced me to focus on a self-critical assessment of my practice and on a sacred story that was perhaps too simplified.

Lastly, there was feedback that clearly contradicted perceptions and beliefs I held about my role, my effectiveness, the realities of student and teacher preferences and student and teacher learning. This was the kind of information that forced me to act, to change; however it pained me to do so. This was also the kind of feedback that found itself as part of a spotlight moment because of the tension it created between my actions and the perceived responses of my colleagues and their students. There were times in feedback given at the end of units of study, that students would question my presence in their classrooms. They expressed frustration at the degree to which they perceived me slowing down the learning. They resented my questions. One student said, “When we already knew something and Mrs. White started asking questions then telling us how to do it, when we already learned it already that got on my nerves” (field texts, 2008). This kind of feedback invited me to question elements of my role and sometimes conclude that I had not yet created a shared space for everyone.

The concept of feedback as a valuable resource for future action is not new. Dewey (1944) affirmed that reflective work allows one to direct the course of similar future experiences and leads toward “intelligent action” (p. 76). Kratochwill and Travers (1996) also stated, “Seeking and receiving feedback about your performance is a critical component of communication and teaching” (p. 345). Rodgers (2002) continued this reasoning, “The power of the reflective cycle seems to rest in its ability to first slow down teachers’ thinking so that they can attend to what is rather than what they wish were so, and then to shift the weight of that

thinking from their own teaching to their students' learning" (Rodgers, 2002, p. 231).

The fact that feedback provided me with some strongly clarifying moments was a personal testament to its power. The most difficult thing was to face feedback with an open mind and a reflective demeanour. It was very easy to become defensive, and this was my first response on more than one occasion. As Rodgers (2002) clarified, "...[feedback] can raise unsettling questions for both teachers and students. For example, teachers may ask themselves if there is a difference between what the teacher taught (i.e. what students were supposed to learn) and what they *actually* learned" (p. 244). These moments gave me cause to look beyond my perfection cover story and face the reality of the learning environment.

This question became even more difficult to answer when examining the perceptions of learning and teaching by people on my educational landscape. It was arguable that my students, and even teachers with whom I worked, may not always have been aware of the degree, or even the process, of their learning. Moreover, my students seemed often to measure learning by their enjoyment of learning, though the two may not have been correlated as directly as they might have thought. In turn, my teacher colleagues seemed to measure their effectiveness in the classroom by how closely their instruction resembled both how they were taught and how they initially learned to teach. Neither measure was surprising. As Ai-Girl (2004) stated, "A person's perception of the learning environment is constructed with reference to his/her contact and experience with multiple factors" (p. 58). However, the tension created by the various perceptions of the students and teachers on my landscape and my interpretation of these perceptions resulted in some valuable insights that cried out to be explored.

Learning is a complex process. It is not easy to define, contain and treat in a black-and-white fashion. However, in collecting and examining a variety of feedback in depth, I began to

see patterns in the beliefs of students and, in turn, in the beliefs of their teachers and in my own beliefs. It was these patterns that ultimately affected my understanding of my identity as a DI Facilitator in a very definite way. It was these patterns that caused me to examine my own professional and personal knowledge and reconfigure aspects of my identity that did not coincide with what I saw and heard from the people I was surrounded by every day.

### **The dance hall: Where it happens**

*The identities we have, the stories we live by, tend to show different facets depending on the situations in which we find ourselves. This is no less true for teachers in their professional knowledge landscapes. Different facets, different identities, can show up, be reshaped and take on new life in different landscape settings. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 95)*

The effect of transitions within our school and our newly amalgamated system seemed to impact staff response to the DI project and the change it implied. There was a time in my first year, at the beginning of my new job, when I felt a strong external resistance to any more change. I felt firm in my knowledge that more change had to occur, but I felt less strong in knowing how that was going to happen. I felt caught between what I was told I had to do in my new role by the facilitators of the Project and what I sensed teachers' needs were in that period of intense change. For a while, I existed in a middle place of trying to do what needed to be done at a pace much slower than I, or the people heading up the Project itself, anticipated.

At the inception of the DI program, my school had gone through a rigorous period of transition. This transition began with the long-time principal leaving mid-year, and an interim principal and two vice-principals (one of whom was me) finishing the year as people new to their roles. The following year, another new principal was hired, who instituted a great deal of change over the course of his first year. As a result, I had to work very hard in the beginning of

my DI role to develop trust between me and my teacher colleagues. They had to feel that I, as a former administrator, was there to support them and not simply negate all their hard work and judge them for their shortcomings. It became easier to be empathetic with my colleagues when I, too, was forced to face some shortcomings within my own practice. I became committed to the process of retelling my spotlight moments as a form of sharing my vulnerability, and although a difficult process, it allowed for growth and change both in me and in my colleagues.

I turn now to a moment when it was necessary to step off the balcony and back into the spotlight. It was a moment when the dance of DI was clarified for me; the turning point in my identity growth.

### **Spotlight moment: The spotlight gets hot**

*I found out Melissa was sick as soon as I got to school and I realized our plans for the day in senior math would have to change. I decided I could still give the students their feedback forms as we had planned, but our final team-teaching lesson would have to be postponed. I went upstairs to her classroom and looked over the plans she had left for Nancy, her substitute. Realizing there seemed to be room for some flexibility, I decided I could perhaps use this hour to my advantage. I went straight downstairs and asked our principal, Marie, if she had time to join us in second period, and be part of a discussion with the class about their DI unit. I told her about my intention to hand out feedback forms and how I thought a discussion would prime the students for good reflective feedback. She agreed this would be a good idea.*

*I spent the first hour of the day imagining how great the next hour was going to be. It would serve as a way to get the students thinking about the activities they had done and the growth in learning they had experienced. It would also be a time when Marie would hear about*

*the wonderful experience DI was, from the students' perspectives.*

*I was sure their feedback was going to be glowing. Melissa and I had spent many hours carefully planning classes that would engage all students regardless of their readiness levels. We had clarified objectives, designed scaffolding strategies, and team-taught our way through a three-week unit. We had, together, pushed past our comfort levels. Melissa seemed to willingly open her safe classroom space and invite it to become a shared space where we could both take risks and support each other as we learned how to differentiate instruction.*

*During our time together, Melissa and I saw reluctant students get excited about learning. As we moved from group to group during problem-solving time, we heard from students that the cooperative methods we were experimenting with were helping many of them learn. Students who had been struggling with the content seemed to be relieved they could finally understand the material.*

*I remember one day when I had to step outside the classroom because I was overcome with emotion. We had struggled to get one highly able student to work well in a group. She obviously hated having to share her knowledge and work with others. We had tried different combinations of students and different group activities but none seemed to work for her. Finally, on this day, we had designed an assignment to provide enrichment for those who needed it. We put answers to questions on the board and asked those students who were finished practicing the new concept to try to decide what the questions were that led to the answers they saw. Our reluctant student audibly sighed but put her head down and gave the problems a try. I watched her work her way through all the examples with some challenge. She frowned from time to time but continued until she was done. When it was time, we asked for the problems that could have led to our solutions and her hand went up. She agreed to go to the board and talk through her*

*ideas while the others listened. She took a risk and shared her understanding. This was a highlight of my time in that classroom. We had finally created a shared space that included all the students and encouraged our last “hold out” to take a chance and be part of the group.*

*I was positive she and the rest of the students recognised their individual and group growth. In my mind, I played out a scenario of the students offering glowing reports of their learning and engagement. I imagined they would express gratitude for being part of a differentiated classroom. I expected to hear the same things I had heard in the days previous from students as they worked in groups. I expected them to know how good they had it.*

*From the moment Marie and I entered the room in period two, I began to have doubts about my decision. There was an electricity in the air that comes with students realizing they have a substitute teacher. This energy was magnified further when they saw Marie. Nancy sat at the front of the classroom and took attendance and then quickly turned the class over to Marie and me. I decided to stand at the back of the classroom and let Marie run the session. I wanted the positive comments to be unsolicited.*

*As soon as Marie began to speak, I knew things would not play out according to my plan. To my consternation, she initiated the reflection and feedback session by telling the students the school had invested \$30 000 in the Differentiated Instruction Project (approximately half my salary) and she began by asking them whether they felt it was worth the money. Before a single student spoke, I felt my stomach drop and I knew my hour with this class was not going to be full of good news.*

*Several of the students began to emphatically shake their heads. Two or three of them immediately asserted there were better ways to spend that kind of money. Like a stubble fire on a windy day, the negativity spread around the room, with flames cropping up where none had*

*been a second before. Soon the classroom was alight with dismay and cries of complaint. The discussion centered on a stated dislike, by some students, for the group work we had encouraged. One student asserted he was unable to learn “this way” and the student who had finally ventured to the board in the previous week said she wanted to go back to the “old way” of learning (personal journal, 2007).*

*I remember standing at the back of the room, trying to control my response to the discussion. I was very aware of Nancy’s presence and was horrified she was witnessing my undoing. I tried to appear unaffected by the comments every time Marie looked back at me. I felt I had to appear as if I had anticipated this all along. I had to be the adult. I could feel the heat of the spotlight on my face and I could feel myself sweat as my heart raced.*

*I tried, in vain, to steer the conversation to a more positive note. I reminded the students of the comments they had made in the past weeks. I reminded them of their growth from their pre-assessments to their mid-assessments. I reminded them that change takes some getting used to and that, over time, they would come to see how this had helped them. In this large group setting, it was clear many students did not feel brave enough to offer feedback that contradicted the tone of the session up to this point. After the initial wave of commentary, only five or six students dominated the remainder of the feedback session while the others sat back and listened.*

*Eventually, the conversation moved away from DI and onto final exams. While Marie continued the discussion, I leaned against the back counter and tried to reason out what had been said. I felt deflated and immensely disappointed. I actually had a fear that Marie would cancel the DI program. On top of that, I felt all confidence I had built up in the previous weeks leave me completely.*

*After Marie left, I continued with my plans and handed out the written feedback forms*

*and action research surveys. As I circulated around the room, I felt like I was standing outside myself. I was on autopilot while my brain struggled to comprehend what I had heard. One student pulled me back out of my thoughts by asking, “What happened there? Things just kinda went crazy, eh?” I agreed and he stated he felt bad about what had happened when Marie was in the room. He confirmed he did not feel strong enough to contribute to the conversation even though he did not agree with most of the comments his peers had made. I asked him why he did not speak up. I was angry with him for not defending the work we had done. Another student sitting next to him agreed it was too difficult to be part of a discussion like that.*

*Later, when I read the feedback forms after the class, I was hoping to see comments that contradicted what had happened in the feedback session. I think I even hoped I would read apologies from the students for misrepresenting our time together. Some of the negative comments were repeated but they were balanced by a large amount of positive feedback. I could not accept the positives and I dwelt on the criticisms instead. There were no apologies.*

This feedback session was so contrary to what I anticipated that to say it “rocked my world” would be an understatement. I took the comments very personally, and for a long while I was unable to separate my own vested interest in how I wanted them to respond from the value of the responses themselves. I allowed the criticisms of the approaches Melissa and I had embraced to affect me so profoundly I later questioned my own role in the Project and my own skill as a classroom teacher.

Even more importantly, I allowed the students’ comments to affect my perceptions of them. I lost my faith in their ability to be accurate in their feedback. I searched for reasons for their responses on every front. I questioned their motivation, their responses to change, my own skill in engaging them. I thought about the many potential layers of their perceptions, their



comfort in the presence of the principal, and their need to assert their views and be heard. It was not until three weeks later that I was truly able to separate their comments from my own perception of myself as a DI Facilitator.

I realize now there were many factors that came into play on that day. It began with the shift in authority in the classroom from Melissa and me to Marie and Nancy. It continued with how Marie framed her initial question and it carried through to peer pressure and to valid concerns about group work in a math class. More importantly, though, I realize I entered that feedback session with some under-developed understandings. I felt Melissa and I had created a safe shared space during our time together. I felt the power of having a place where two people could share their challenges and successes in an atmosphere of trust. I felt the power of a dance where both partners were working together. What I failed to recognize was the role of the students in that shared space. While they were not part of the dance partnership, they were part of the dance hall and their presence impacted our dance. They, too, were part of our shared experience and with Melissa gone and Nancy and Marie there, I had disrupted the equilibrium of our shared space. I felt how different things were on that day and so did the students. That feedback session had little to do with my work in their classroom and more to do with an hour filled with a chance to talk about their entire school experience. This spotlight moment taught me about the fragility of a shared space and the power it has over all its members.

### **Dance II: The lessons continue**

*Action research is, therefore, a deliberate way of creating new situations and of telling the story of who we are...but you will learn only if it is a genuine inquiry. If you are controlled by developers and implementors, then you may be trained rather than educated. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 153)*

If I step back further in time to my first year as a DI Facilitator, I start to see glimpses of my identity as it began to shift very early on. Almost immediately, I began to seek out formal feedback as a way to provide clarity for directions I would take and changes I would try to facilitate. Because teachers were overwhelmed and my work began slowly with colleagues, I found I wanted to turn to students and the perceptions they had about their school experiences. I was unprepared for the intensity of the journey this initial interest would provide and the effect it would have on me as a teacher and as a researcher.

I remember when the leaders of our DI project informed us at our very first meeting we would be expected to complete an action research project that year that would link our work to improved student outcomes, I was angry. I resisted the idea. I felt the action research was too much to ask of us when we knew so little about all other aspects of the differentiated philosophy and our role as facilitators of DI in our schools. I also felt being held accountable for our effectiveness solely through growth in student outcomes was unfair, when our role was primarily to impact teacher practice. I spoke up about my feelings very early on and created some tension between myself and the group leader that continued, in some degree, for the following two years. However, the action research did not go away.

As a result, I moved forward as required and decided to focus my action research on my interest in student perceptions about their learning. I began to believe I could benefit from formally collecting data from students and I also began to consider this same theme for my thesis work. I developed a survey and administered it to over 150 students, asking both open-ended and rating-based questions about their experiences with group work, their experiences with teaching methods, and their overall impressions of school.

New to the experience of surveys I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of results I

collected. Organizing them into a manageable format proved daunting and I began to see, very early on, my methodology was not entirely sound. I realized some questions were misinterpreted and others were too general. I also began to sense students enjoyed the chance to express their frustrations and I began to be concerned about things like validity and sincerity. I worked hard to make my interpretations authentic and reliable but, as time progressed, I began to feel my research collapsing under the weight of too many variables.

Despite these very legitimate concerns, I also began to sense an importance in the results when viewed as a whole. When I allowed myself to step back and examine the story the results seemed to be telling, I began to notice the degree to which student perceptions seemed to differ from my own perceptions and teacher beliefs about what was occurring in classes. Further, I began to wonder why some students felt so positively about their school experience and others felt so negatively. I started to sense there was a very real disconnect, for some students, between their needs and their actual classroom experience. I wondered how much their feedback actually reflected their perceptions, and I was curious about perception and how it is linked to actual experience.

By the time I was due to present my action research findings, I had explored varied literature; the topics connected by each new question I raised. I became convinced that exploring how students and teachers learn instead of just how teachers teach, had to become the focus of my work. I began to realize the importance I placed in student opinion. I started to question the weight I had placed in accessing student perception as a direct path to effective teaching. I also began to think about the reasons I had vested so much interest in what people think as opposed to what they do. I began to sense that deep within me, these questions were linked to my identity and the notion was unsettling. I began to realize, at the end of my first year, I would have to start

to answer some of these questions about myself if I was going to become more effective both as a teacher and as a DI Facilitator. Finally, I began to notice that the stories the students were sharing through my data and through their anecdotal feedback were more important to me than the numbers I had so carefully collated. I began to really listen to their stories and use what they were telling me to become more effective in my work.

I took time to share my research with students and discuss some of the things I had read. I felt compelled to link my new understandings with people on my landscape; to share and learn in my classrooms in an attempt to make the literature real.

When the time came to share my action research with my DI group, I stepped back from the numbers I had laboured to collect and analyze, and chose instead, to share storied spotlight moments. This decision to rely on stories to inform my practice was a watershed moment. From this moment came my dance into the power of narrative research and there was no turning back.

### **Storying the dance**

*We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (Dewey, 1938, p. 49)*

Attending to my experiences as they occurred in the moment, holding them up and examining them, and applying the knowledge I gained to my understanding of who I was as a teacher and how I will function in future experiences, is the intention of my inquiry. I looked at storied experiences that affected me both incidentally and profoundly and viewed them in context, as singular moments in time capable of informing my future actions.

The stories I lived shaped the stories that followed. They shaped how I viewed myself as

a professional. Without searching inside those moments, it is hard to imagine what could have facilitated such a profound change in how I functioned in my educational setting. Each story is a spotlight moment, a snapshot, but as Dewey (1938) asserted, “Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (p. 38). Narrative inquiry facilitates a means to communicate my storied moments of identity shifting in the midst of a greater landscape of change. The setting is specific, the program is unique and the moments are temporal, “located in relation to other events that have preceded it or will come after it” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 131).

Despite the specific nature of these moments, the potential for a broader understanding of shifting identities in shared spaces cannot be ignored. My feelings, impressions, joys, and sorrows are my own, but my hope for even greater meaning lies in the relationship between me as a writer and the readers who will read this work. Schaafsma, Pagnucci, Wallace, and Stock (2007) clarified, “We always tell our stories to listeners who have their own stories to bring to the hearing, and who care to listen, interpret, and understand” (p. 303). The shifting of my identity will be described in this research, but the impact of this same research will ultimately belong to the reader. This is where the power of narrative inquiry lies. This methodology gives me the pleasure of extracting my own meaning from my own experiences. Shields (2005) clarified this point:

I gave up my search for that expert knowledge outside myself that engaged me for so many years. Instead, I have taken a path that leads toward supporting myself in a journey to become my own authority, using as curriculum all of my life’s experiences to provide the very fertile ground for me to come to know in my own unique way. (p. 187)

Further, it invites me to share stories, aspects of which others too have felt, dreamed and

dreaded. Like the relationships I describe, the movement between reader and writer is a dance of complexity, shifting with each new partnership.

### **The dance continues**

Although this DI dance occurred for only two years, there was much new choreography in that time. This is a story without an ending. As new experiences occur, my learning is enhanced, adapted, and reformed. To me, qualitative research exposes the organic nature of experience more clearly. This research stories many of my experiences as a DI Facilitator working inside classrooms with teachers and students. It explores how my professional identity was shaped by a multitude of factors involving a variety of individuals. It explores who I was in my role as a DI Facilitator and in my role as a classroom teacher. It questions who I am in safe spaces, when I am dancing alone or with my students and who I am in shared spaces when I am dancing with my colleagues. Maybe, in the end, when I look in the mirror, I will recognize the person looking back at me. I will know her for her fears and her successes, her simplicity and her complexity. I will know her for her stories.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Accepting the dance as my own

*...and what we saw now was a spider's web. Bits of story finding and connecting with one another. But what if the pattern I thought I was hearing was all wrong? (Jones, 2007, p. 92)*

The moments preceding the revelation of my inquiry question and my sudden acceptance seemed urgent. I hung on to my ideas as if they were part of me and the prospect of replacing them or even refining them was as terrifying as if they were a limb about to be torn off. I was trying to dance to music in the way I had planned but the music was no longer recognizable. I panicked, imagining I would never be able to use any steps I had already learned. The dance hall spun around me and I could feel myself searching for something I knew. Finally, I simply shut my eyes and allowed the music to enter my body and guide my movements. Amazingly, the dance became intuitive and genuine. It became my dance.

When my advisor, Debbie, and my classmates in my second Masters-level reading class proposed my thesis might not be solely about feedback after all, I panicked. Months of work and reading and writing piled up behind me, a mass of thoughts and theories that would potentially never find a form. I immediately knew they were right but I fought the notion of an autobiographical piece. I felt it would be self-indulgent. I worried I would perseverate over my own experience and it would, ultimately, be meaningless for anyone but myself. I couldn't see how it could work, much less have any impact on my profession.

I am thankful for Debbie's caution and patience. She asked questions and probed me to think hard about what I needed to say. She invited me to explore my own convictions, my own stories. When my classmates echoed her questions and impressions, I could no longer follow the

routine I had been choreographing for myself for over a year. On the day I accepted my desire to tell my own story of my dance as a Differentiated Instruction Facilitator, I finally felt the passion of my own voice pushing past its cover stories, its doubts, and its partners. I felt the potential strength of positioning myself at the center of my inquiry and viewing the dance hall around me from my own perspective. I began to see my colleagues, the research, my PLC, and the students as the voices that invited shifts in my identity, instead of as the voices of my identity.

### **My own dance**

*I've cut myself off.  
I can feel the place  
where I used to be attached.  
It's raw, as when you grate  
your finger. It's a shredded mess  
of images. It hurts.  
But where exactly on me  
is this torn-off stem?  
Now here, now there.  
(Atwood, 2007, p. 4)*

Accepting what was really most important to me took some mental reworking. I needed to view the dance from a different angle. I took myself off the balcony. I moved feedback out of the spotlight and moved myself in. Immediately, the temperature rose as the light focused directly on me.

My notes from that day in Debbie's class tell the story of how ideas flowed quickly from our discussion about my inquiry. I wrote about how my shared spaces had been intersecting with my safe spaces. My connection to the language of Clandinin and Connelly found a solid place in my work. I wrote, "...stories are important in how they impact me" (field notes, May, 2008). I accepted the importance feedback and spotlight moments held for me. I accepted that writing



about my own experiences, if done thoughtfully and reflectively, could hold importance for others in similar positions who share spaces with other professionals. Debbie and my fellow Masters students clarified the importance of making visible my own vulnerability because this vulnerability, spoken of so rarely in public, shared spaces, is vital to understanding how shifting identity impacts educational practice and philosophy. The spotlight moments when I experienced strong tensions which later invited an examination of my identity spoke to me and to my graduate school colleagues about viewing challenges and even failures as opportunities for self-examination and self-reflection. Miller (2005) explained her similar revelation:

As I shared these thoughts as brief and situated evidence of the never-to-be resolved tensions between theory and practice as well as between the habitual and power-infused roles of professors and teachers in any attempt at collaborative research, the other group members gently reminded me that our work together resided in those tensions. (p. 143)

Like Miller, the tensions which existed in my work on both my educational landscape and my research landscape were an essential catalyst for me to reflect on my experiences and to grow from them. Miller further explained the value of this endeavour, “For me, this ‘performance’ of autobiographical voice and professional identity reveals how working the past autobiographically enables one to ‘midwife’ the future and, in doing so, reconstruct the public space in which identity is reiterated” (p. xii).

By sharing my personal professional stories, there was potential to invite reflection which could, ultimately, shape future negotiations of identity in shared spaces, both by me and by the readers of my inquiry. My spotlight moments could be laid alongside other moments when identity is tested and space is shared—places like Professional Learning Communities and team-teaching relationships, when one’s identity-shifting is laid bare for others to see.

### **My role in the dance: Taking a risk**

*In effect, I had to consider the ways in which I still carried vestiges of myself as a 'good girl' teacher and researcher, now willing to attempt fresh and challenging forms of collaborative research and autobiographical inquiry, but still hesitant to report such attempts in forms that defied or challenged socially sanctioned constructions of research reporting and writing within the academy. (Miller, 2005, p. 160)*

The internal conflict I was feeling in deciding to move forward with an autobiographical methodology was partly a by-product of the dialogue surrounding autobiography as a valid form of educational research. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) asserted, "There is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves" (p. 31). This methodology is necessary in providing a perspective which would not be explored by other means. Rasanen (2002) wrote, "Teacher identity is a part of the story we tell about ourselves. It is built in the interactive circle of representation and reflection. Self-narrative is not self-voyeurism but experimenting with one's own experiences" (p. 178). Writing autobiographically was a little like shutting my eyes and moving to the music, hoping others would join in but also deciding to continue even if they did not.

In the end, I decided to inquire into my spotlight moments, choreographing my research autobiographically. This meant reaching past the need to just tell my stories and explore a more expansive notion of self-narrative as a form of research. I needed to examine my stories within a larger context. I needed to consider the relational nature of my identity shifting and the possibility this shifting held to shape decisions within my Differentiated Instruction role. If I was going to embark on a research journey, I needed to expand my understanding of autobiographical narrative inquiry and the role this methodology would play in both making visible and, eventually in contributing to my shifting identity. Miller (2005) explored the

potential of autobiography when she wrote:

If in fact we educators were to recognize constructions of our ‘selves’ as mediated by discourses, cultural contexts, and the unconscious, then the uses of autobiography as one form of educational research necessarily could move beyond just the simplistic ‘telling of teachers’ stories’ as an end unto itself. (Miller, 2005, p. 53)

Moving my spotlight stories into autobiographical narrative inquiry required a shift in how I interpreted my field texts. It invited me to add another lens to the analysis of my experiences and relate my personal practical knowledge to my particular context and to changes in my practice and philosophy about teaching and learning. It invited me to stand inside the dance hall and view my surroundings from where I was standing. I shifted my gaze inward and then outward at those around me. I looked backward to the personal practical knowledge I had gained through years of experiences, and then forward to the classrooms I would be sharing with others. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained the importance of creating this kind of narrative commonplace, “As we compose our narrative beginnings, we also work within the three-dimensional space, telling stories of our past that frame our present standpoints, moving back and forth from the personal to the social, and situating it all in place” (p. 70). I began to see my spotlight moments as ways to examine my educational landscape.

Nevertheless, a further challenge came with my methodology decision. I needed to resist viewing my spotlight moments as stories that led neatly into fairytale conclusions about my role as a DI Facilitator in shared spaces. I had to resist looking at every experience within my two years in that role on that particular educational landscape and conclude that everything had turned out just right. I had to acknowledge I had not learned everything I needed to know to be able to move into the future with complete confidence and skill in sharing a space with

colleagues and their students. Miller (2005) expanded on this dilemma, “But what I have found is that admonitions to ‘tell your story’ often lead to what I and others fondly refer to as ‘cheerful’ versions of teacher research...” (p. 221). She went on to write:

What often gets normalized in such uses of autobiography is a singularity of story that a subject is encouraged to tell about herself as a teacher. Such singularity closes the door to multiple, conflicting and even odd and abnormal—queer—stories and identities” (p. 221).

She identified her greatest concern with attempting autobiography that results in tidy endings when she wrote, “I worry, then, that many current uses of autobiography in education assume a developmental ‘end’ product as well as possibilities of ‘best practice’ in constructions of teacher selves, curriculum materials, and pedagogical approaches” (p. 222).

Very early on in my work as a DI Facilitator, I worried our Project would promote the notion of differentiating instruction as the “best practice” for all teachers all the time. I resisted the idea there could be a right answer and that right answers, once discovered, would remain right for all time. This same concern was echoed in my research. I resisted the idea that my research would provide one right answer to creating truly effective shared space with identities protected and intact. I also resisted the generalization that when moving into shared spaces, all teachers would experience huge shifts in identity. I did not know this to be true. All I could do was share my spotlight moments within a context of time and space and hope others could connect with my experiences and lay some of my insights alongside their own journeys. I hoped my spotlight moments would evoke opportunities for readers to pull forward their own stories, telling and retelling them in order to relive their own experiences in new ways. As a fellow DI Facilitator wrote after she read my work, “When looking back, I realized that I was so engrossed

in the stories that you were sharing that I was lost in my own connections—powerful writing! There were so many places that I felt you were telling ‘my story’” (personal communication, January, 2009). This was my hope.

### **Memories of a dance**

*This changing teaching practice in school is so complex—a little political, a little PR, a lot of planning, coaching, collaborating. It is so much like a really complicated dance. (personal journal, 2007)*

Writing autobiographically meant, initially, moving down from the balcony where I had been standing for so long viewing the dance floor as more of a critical bystander than as a participant. It meant stepping back onto the dance floor and remembering all of the partners and our dances together in terms of how they shaped my understanding of myself as a dancer. When I thought my research was about feedback, I could remove myself, somewhat, from the emotion of each spotlight moment and examine what I had learned about being a DI Facilitator from the feedback from colleagues and students. I was able to put some distance between myself and the moment. I looked at the feedback as objectively as possible—categorizing it, sorting it, and relating it to my role. However, once I decided to place myself back under the spotlight and remain there, the meaning of feedback and the stories that went with it intensified. My research became an examination of who I was throughout my time on the dance floor. I began to look outward from where I was and see how the literature, my colleagues, my Differentiated Instruction Professional Learning Community (DI PLC), my landscape and my students were shaping how I was understanding myself in my new role. I began to wonder how sharing spaces with others really was changing how I saw myself as a teacher. I returned to the balcony from time to time, to look at myself from above. However, I stopped looking at everything on that

complicated dance floor and began to look at those things that were directly shaping me and my dance.

This change in focus increased the importance of my personal journals. From the very beginning of my DI role, I was asked to keep a reflective journal as part of my work. The suggestion was made to use our journal reflections as the basis for the Blackboard reflections<sup>2</sup> we would be required to do each month. Further to this, my first Masters class had a journaling component as well. I decided to combine both requirements into a journal in which I could reflect both on my job and on my graduate work. This proved to be an invaluable decision. Those journal entries became an essential component of my field texts for this research.

Eakin (1999) suggested autobiographical writing largely comes after identity shifting has occurred, "...for the selves we display in autobiographies are doubly constructed, not only in the act of writing a life story but also in a life long process of identity formation of which the writing is usually a comparatively late phase" (p. ix). In order to keep my shifting identity under the spotlight and examine it as much as possible as it occurred, I depended on my journal entries to document tensions and resulting changes in both my beliefs and my practice. Relying solely on memory would have prevented me from a close examination of my shifting identity. Eakin emphasized the notion of double construction of self by stating, "We can never expect to witness the emergent sense of self as an observable event precisely because it is an ongoing process, taking place mostly beneath our notice from day to day" (p. x).

It is true that there was no precise moment when my identity shifted, but by documenting my experiences, some of which became my spotlight moments, I was able to capture some of the

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<sup>2</sup> Blackboard is part of an e-learning website, where a group of registered participants can engage in reflections and forum discussions on subjects of their choice. This was the method our DI PLC used to communicate regularly and post monthly reflections.

more significant moments that eventually led to shifts in my identity. Once the emotions of the moments passed, I was able to tell and retell the spotlight moments in order to reflect on how these moments shaped my identity. Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1996) suggested, "...memories of past selves change when they are viewed in relation to new experiences" (p. 65). In examining my journal entries, unpacking my spotlight moments, and spending time inquiring into the many selves that emerged from my experiences, I was able to see patterns in what became significant to me in my DI role. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) asserted the importance of journal writing, "This ongoing reflection-on-action on a daily basis begins to provide insight into personal knowledge when you reread entries over several days and weeks" (p. 35).

In addition to providing me with field texts, my journal writing was a cathartic exercise in a time when my philosophy and understanding of who I was as a teacher were constantly changing. Cowhey (2006) echoed my need to document my dance when she writes:

I always looked forward to writing my weekly reflection journals...it was a way for me to make sense of my work, which sometimes felt isolated, in a larger framework. It was my chance to connect, to tell someone the stories of my classroom and my students. (p. ix)

Like me, Cowhey eventually shared her entries with another person. At the end of my first year as a Masters student and as a DI Facilitator, I was able to synthesize my thoughts into a reflective paper as part of my graduate class. This process invited me to really examine the journey of my first year both in my work and in my research. It provided me with a perspective that other field texts would not offer.

I further tried to sort things out by creating mind maps that charted my understanding of student and teacher feedback and perceptions, and how they informed the work I did. I saved reflections regarding my position and posted them on the Blackboard message board. The

richness of my reflective field texts lent itself to a detailed retrospective analysis of my two years as a DI Facilitator in a specific school landscape.

### **Documenting the DI dance: Other field texts**

*As inquirers, we tend to define our phenomenon as if life stood still and did not get in our way. But life does not stand still; it is always getting in the way, always making what may appear static and not changing into a shifting, moving, interacting complexity. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 125)*

I am fortunate to have chosen to work on my graduate studies at the same time I chose to work as a DI Facilitator. I claimed my classroom time as dance studio time, wherein I could practice the choreography I was learning in my university classes. In turn, I could apply the experience I obtained through my daily work in my classrooms to the theoretical knowledge I was discovering in my graduate classes. I felt equally as pleased my thesis topic centred on the work I was doing at my school. It originally seemed very tidy...except it did not turn out that way.

Being aware of myself as both a participant in my study and the researcher who represented my own experiences presented some challenges to the neatness of my arrangement. Faithfully recording events in the form of field notes and resisting the urge to analyze and interpret the events before I even had them recorded was difficult. The lines between participant and researcher, field text and research text were blurry at times. It was difficult work to keep it all straight.

My thesis is an autobiographical narrative inquiry exploring how changes in my professional practice have shaped my identity. I spent a good deal of time engaged in reflective practice that was both part of negotiating my identity and negotiating my research. The two were



enmeshed. Experiencing life and writing about the lived experiences as field texts and eventually research texts were all part of my identity-shaping. My research influenced my identity which, in turn, influenced the experiences that shaped the research itself. The two could not be separated. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) clarified the interwoven nature of narrative inquiry when they wrote, “We have been pursuing this work under the heading of *narrative inquiry* with a rough sense of narrative as both phenomena under study *and* method of study” (p. 4).

Collecting some of the field texts related to my DI position was cumbersome, but not necessarily difficult. Inherent in my position were a number of required forms of documentation about DI processes and procedures: there were feedback forms in various formats, action research reports, and time logs.

As part of my inquiry, I read dissertations, books, and journal articles. As I found moments in my reading when something triggered thoughts about my own work both in the classroom and in my research, I often took this opportunity to jot down impressions or memories that were part of my dance with the literature. I asked myself questions and this work prompted me to explore certain aspects of my job that were troubling me or exciting me. I always tried to be conscious of two processes at work at the same time: my objective record of information contained in readings or accounts of my teaching experiences, and interpretation of these same readings or events. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, “...field texts slide back and forth between records of the experience under study and records of oneself as researcher experiencing the experience” (p. 87). While it was challenging at times, I worked hard to separate my field texts from interpretive interim texts. If I felt the urge to record thoughts about events or readings, I would either create a margin beside the field texts in which to do so or I would create new files on my computer for the sole purpose of recording my thoughts and interpretations. As a result,

when moving my way through the inquiry, I could access both records and my own interpretations as needed.

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) stated, “What is missing in the classroom is a place for teachers to tell and retell their stories of teaching” (p. 13). Through my field texts, I attempted to document my own stories as I lived and worked in the midst of a variety of dancers on the dance floor of my educational landscape. The people with whom I worked, teachers and students alike, were catalysts to my own wonderings and their voices were helpful in clarifying my own exploration of changing identity. Eakin (1999) wrote, “Identity is always negotiated relationally, interpersonally” (p. 40). My spotlight moments were a result of relationships. As I moved from my safe classroom spaces to shared spaces with colleagues and their students and then to public spaces with my staff and DI PLC, I began to reflect on how this shifting from space to space, in turn, shifted my identity.

In order to encourage this reflection and to keep track of my time spent with colleagues and their students, I documented my collegial relationships through the planning binders<sup>3</sup> I kept. I also asked for written feedback from both teachers and students at various points in our shared time together in order to get a sense of the effect differentiated instruction was having on both groups. I narrated student successes and difficulties through class observations and diagnostic, formative and summative assessments. I spent time examining work students had done and their written reflections on this work. I then turned inward to my journal, and recorded my own reflections on the time I was spending in shared spaces and the various responses of teachers and students to this shared time. All this recording and collecting was part of my attempt to document two years of change, both externally and internally. It was my attempt to give voice to

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<sup>3</sup> Planning binders were binders I kept to record the path of discussions teachers and I had engaged in as well as the actual lesson and unit plans we had made together.

others outside the conduit of the DI PLC. Somehow I knew other voices were important and I searched out ways to hear them.

I used my field texts to examine my identity within the vast and complex landscape in which I worked. In the span of two years, I became a different teacher. I saw myself differently, with a clearer philosophy and a renewed idea of who I wanted to be.

### **Examining someone who dances**

*Rather, I want to explore the pleasure and horror—perhaps even the necessity—of the stories we tell ourselves and others, the stories that have been told about us by our families, friends, and acquaintances. I want to explore the stories of voice and silence...because these stories changed me, changed what and how I taught, and challenged what I thought I knew. (Miller, 2005, p. 121)*

As a DI Facilitator, I learned to dance an endless number of dances with a variety of partners in as many settings. I moved back and forth between the safe space of my own classroom and the shared spaces of other's classrooms. I learned to dance to many types of music, all the while, teaching others new movements and steps. Together, we danced around a changed dance hall, sometimes stumbling over our cover stories, sometimes coasting through new stories, with new philosophies and new choreography, helping each other find our way into new routines. These new dances invited me to examine my shifting identity in a changing educational landscape. My own dance was part of the dance others were doing, and I could not have danced alone. Sharing this journey with others invited me to look in at myself. This allowed me, in turn, to look out at the larger educational trend of moving teachers into shared spaces and the effect this move may have on system stories, cover stories and, ultimately, the identity of others.

When I look at the dance floor of my experience, it is impossible to separate my journey

as a dancer from my decision to inquire into my story of my dance with others. Narrative research is linked to the exploration of identity because, “The meaning one ascribes to an event rests in large part on who one is” (Rodgers, 2006, p. 217). The experiences I have chosen to explore as spotlight moments are important to me because of who I was and who I am. Coelho (2006) clarified, “Because the hand that draws each line reflects the soul of the person making that line” (p. 76). These events may or may not have held the same significance for another person. Furthermore, because each moment is temporal, these moments hold a different significance for me now than they did when they occurred. Through telling and retelling these spotlight moments, the significance they have had in shaping my identity has changed over time. Each retelling comes from a different place in time, with different experiences and understandings to add to the old ones. I am, in effect, a different person with each retelling. Eakin (1999) clarified this when he wrote, “...for there are many stories of self to tell, and more than one self to tell them” (p. ix). The act of writing narratively invited further shifts in identity because with each retelling, the experience took on new and different meanings and invited me to live in new and different ways based on knowledge I had gained.

Eakin (1999) further explained the power of narrative writing when he wrote:

...narrative’s role in self-representation extends well beyond the literary; it is not merely one form among many in which to express identity, but rather an integral part of a primary mode of identity experience, that of the extended self, the self in time. (p. 137)

Telling and retelling my stories resulted in a change in how I functioned in my DI role. This narrative work shaped the work I did with my colleagues and their students, the role I played in my DI PLC, and the research I chose to undertake. Changes in my identity became the focus of my spotlight moments and unpacking these moments caused further change in my identity.

Casbon, Shagoury, Smith and Carpenter (2005) wrote, "...there is an intersection and a deep connection between our inner landscapes and our outer manifestation in the world" (p. 361). The work I was doing internally was shaping the work I was doing on the outside and was inviting me to relive new experiences in different ways.

In my second year as a DI Facilitator, I continued to struggle with understanding who I was in my role. Later in that year, I wrote:

Identity...I am thinking about how I have said I couldn't return to the classroom after doing DI (and admin). I think that comes from seeing myself as a changer, an idealist.

That is a new part of my identity. I can't help myself. I need to say things that cause people to stretch and to think. (personal journal, April, 2008)

At this time, I was still struggling with conflicting feelings about who I was on my school landscape. I realized I had changed but I did not completely welcome that change. I was almost apologetic for needing to push people in their thinking. I was worried my colleagues would come to resent me or even avoid me. I seemed to feel things would be better on my internal landscape if I could stop needing to see things the way they could be on the external landscape of my school. This negotiation of who I was becoming was so challenging at times, it was painful. My need to be 'effective' in my role was paramount but the direction I was taking was not always clear or enjoyable. Furthermore, I was not sure what 'effective' even meant or who would be the judge of my effectiveness or ineffectiveness. I knew I wanted to experience success in my role but it continued to be difficult to determine what success meant. This dilemma influenced my research, my work, my relationships with my colleagues, and my understanding of myself.

### **Protecting my dancing self**

In sharing my story, I needed to celebrate and acknowledge the old version of my Self, who was the central figure in my storied spotlight moments. This Self was hard to protect because the history of the old me and the new me were completely enmeshed. I did not wish my new Self to coax my old Self into revealing more than she was comfortable with. For that reason, I enlisted a critical friend—a fellow DI Facilitator and personal friend, to help me protect my old Self and her best interests. My friend helped me ensure the many variations of my Self were fairly represented. She walked alongside me in my DI journey and shared many of the same challenges, questions, and celebrations. She was part of a different shared space of DI Facilitators, who met regularly to learn, plan, and support one another. Although we worked in different schools, we shared the same direction and desire to become better teachers and better facilitators. After she first read some of my writing, she wrote, “One thing that became clear to me about our DI PLC is that I believe we have moved into a different phase of the project whereby the ‘voices’ we are hearing, including yours and mine, are now willing to shed cover stories and get down to the grassroots of the project” (personal communication, 2008). Together, we longed to make our work richer and more meaningful. We articulated our fears and our deepest questions and this resulted in another type of shared space that provided her a richer ability to understand my research.

As a result of this rich understanding, my critical friend read my work in its various forms and asked questions, challenging me to probe deeper. She highlighted aspects of my work that echoed her own experiences. These were questions I went on to explore more deeply, searching out reasons for our shared experiences. Most importantly, she ensured the characters

in my spotlight moments could not be identified and that I did not permit myself to become too vulnerable in my work. She helped me to ensure the stories I told had a purpose and a universality beneficial to my research and the people who would read it. In essence I invited her to become part of a shared research space wherein she walked alongside me in my journey.

### **Protecting the voices of others**

*My beliefs guide my teaching immensely. And they lead to what I consider mostly successful teaching. I believe in the wonder of learning—completely. And I believe in the wonder of the individual. Students come to me with millions of stories and the beauty, for me, is figuring out how to connect and how to help students to find joy in their own learning. Everything is guided by this. It is like a very important dance for me. (personal journal, October, 2006)*

In order to effectively examine my changing identity in shared spaces, I needed to be vigilant in my attempts to capture experience. Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) explained that, “Narrative inquiry is a kind of inquiry that requires particular kinds of wakefulness” (p. 21). Context has always been part of my inquiry. Further, the people captured in my storied moments are partners in the learning occurring through the research. Their importance in the narratives must be acknowledged and celebrated. While the stories describe my journey into myself, the people with whom I spent my days were integral in this self exploration. Listening to their voices, watching their responses, spending time in their spaces led to inner ponderings and even inner conversations about who I was becoming and why. Their external voices led to internal voices within me that constantly challenged me to push harder and farther into discovering my motivations and priorities.

The spotlight moments I share and the exploration that springs from them have been about my own identity shifting. The people who shared my spotlight moments were characters,

vitaly important because of their roles in my stories. They provided me with opportunities to question who I was becoming, as a teacher, through my DI work. However, this research is not about them. It is about who I was when I was working among them. Their importance lies in the guidance they provided me. Living alongside them helped me to know myself better.

The varied nature of the time I spent with people in my school and in my DI PLC was such an integral part of my identity shaping that it was crucial to carefully represent their role in the shared spaces we forged together. The trust I built with the many people with whom I worked was vital to both the success of my job as a DI Facilitator and my role as a researcher. Being invited to move beyond cover stories and past sacred stories, meant facing fears, questions and doubt. The teachers, students, and my DI colleagues who live in my field texts and inhabit my storied moments are enmeshed in the development in my identity. Their work in sharing their safe classroom spaces and moving beyond their cover stories was an invitation for me to do the same. However, while the nature of our relationships will be explored, their identities will not. Their importance in both my job and my research will be revealed but details that would cause them to be identifiable will not. My ethical responsibility to my colleagues and students has led me to honour them for the strength they showed in inviting me into their safe classroom spaces. Their identities have been protected because it is not their names, gender, or positions that assisted me in my growth, but their willingness to share. As Eakin (1999) wrote, “Because our own lives never stand free of the lives of others, we are faced with our responsibility to those others when we write about ourselves” (p. 159).

In the case of my spotlight moments, the relationships I co-constructed with students, teachers and my fellow DI Facilitators on my educational landscape and in my PLC were rich and nuanced. It was the very complexity of these relationships that made my spotlight moments



so memorable. The tensions that remained throughout these moments were springboards to work inside myself. Without these tensions, my spotlight moments would not have held such importance. While I was naturally drawn to the tensions for their transformative quality, it was important to examine my time with an eye to fullness of experience. Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2003) explained the appeal of writing only about tension for researchers, “When we listen to and read narratives, researchers (we) tend to be drawn to—in fact to *code for*—the exotic, the bizarre, the violent” (p. 186). To avoid this, I invited myself to look at the times of clarity as often as at the times of confusion. I needed to examine all my field texts, many of which show evidence of times of confidence and encouragement. I needed to represent these experiences with as much import as the times of tension.

### **Searching for myself within the dance**

When I began my inquiry, I started by sifting through my spotlight moments, considering which invited the deepest shifts in my identity and which clarified my work throughout the two years on my landscape. While there were many spotlight moments to consider, my attention was first drawn to those that spoke of a tension between my personal practical knowledge and the conduit knowledge I was expected to communicate. The voice of the conduit impacted my practice immensely in my first year and caused me to refine my personal practical knowledge at a rate that was often uncomfortable. I realized that my DI dance was not just an individual dance or even a simple partnership. Instead, it was also a dance shaped by choreographers and the people who were playing the music. I needed to clarify the impact of the conduit and its message first. I needed to explain the music and the required dance steps before I could examine how my own dance style and the partnerships I formed emerged from the force of the conduit.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The dance of voices

*To reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences. (Dewey, 1938, p. 87)*

I now move back to the balcony, close my eyes, and imagine my two years as a Differentiated Instruction Facilitator. My thoughts shift again to an image of a metaphoric dance hall. The lights are bright in areas and dim in others. The music is loud while patrons shout to be heard over the varying tempos and rhythms. Couples glide around the dance floor, some effortlessly and others with some challenge. People sitting at tables ringing the dance floor, watch with varying degrees of interest, some learning new steps and observing different styles of dance. Some never leave the dance floor and others find it difficult to work up the nerve to get out there. This dance hall is a place of experience and movement. It is a place of innate rhythms and socialization. It is a place where things are never the same two nights in a row—yet aspects of the dance hall remain the same always.

When I examine the dynamic pieces of this metaphor, I can compare the dance hall experience to my time as both a facilitator of and a participant in change. This same complexity and variability combined with predictability and stability made up my time on my school landscape. When I try to deconstruct and reflect on my time in the DI Project, it is as though I am trying to take apart the complexity of a dance hall and explain how I was able to dance in such a varied and stimulating place on a particular series of evenings in the history of the hall itself.

My experience in the Project was complex and this complexity was heightened because of the increasingly large number of voices vying for my attention. As I danced in and out of different classrooms and interacted with many dance partners, I searched for the voices of my partners during our time on and off the dance floor. Furthermore, I tried not to lose my own voice amid the others. During the two years in the DI role on my school's landscape, my own voice rose and fell in its strength, understanding, and confidence. The stories I lived and then told and retold spoke of a searching, shifting identity. I strove to listen and adapt based on the other voices dancing around me and with me. The voices who chose the music, set the tempo, and danced alongside me gave me cause to constantly compare my own beliefs with their voices.

In the beginning, my own voice was quieted while the voices of the educational researchers, the divisional leaders, and my Differentiated Instruction Professional Learning Community (DI PLC) members took precedence. I strove to learn more, know more, understand more, and this caused me to hold my identity close while I explored the messages of others, delivered to me through the conduit. The messages I heard were about differentiation, about action research, and about how I was going to change others.

As my first year progressed, I began to sense that the messages I was receiving about my DI role were as important in what they were failing to say as in what they were saying. I started to see that there were many assumptions in the conduit message. There was a constancy expected both within us as facilitators and in the teachers and students with whom we worked. I began to see that who I was in days past was different from who I was becoming. I sensed that elements of the very human endeavour I was undertaking were not being recognized in the conduit. I identified a tension, at times, between the conduit message and my own personal practical knowledge. My voice began to grow in strength and I attempted to blend the messages

from others with my own beliefs and eventually, with the voices of the teachers and students with whom I worked. I strove to ensure the message I delivered to my colleagues was one which reflected a strong personal belief and was not just the message of the conduit. This posed some challenges at times and my dance in, around, and between the messages of others became a key factor in my identity shifting.

### **The beginnings of music**

*The view of knowledge as received, expert, and hierarchical is widely accepted in our school, in other schools within our board, and in the society in which we live. Because it is seldom called into question, it becomes a sacred story within the professional knowledge landscape. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 114)*

The summer between when I accepted the job of DI Facilitator and when I began to actually work in this new role was a honeymoon period. All summer, I luxuriously read about new trends in education and how these trends linked to or were a part of the differentiated philosophy. I had not yet begun my Masters work, so the literature I chose was based solely on desire, interest, and accessibility.

In July of 2006, I spent five days sitting by the pool at a city hotel, half watching my life-jacketed children splash their way through the morning and half devouring issues of *Educational Leadership* from the year before, given to me by my past Director of Education. While my husband spent his days marking the provincial Math Assessments for Learning, I began to explore information I had been missing out on in my safe classroom space and in my vice-principal office. I began to see I had been responding to problems as opposed to researching how to be proactive in preventing them. I clearly remember my excitement as I realized there was whole world of literature that could make me a better teacher. Further, as I read, I began to get a

sense of how monumental a change our division was anticipating when it formed our small DI Project. I started, very early on, to think about how I was going to facilitate what I perceived as large-scale changes in teaching practice in my own school. The weight of responsibility began to show itself, but I enjoyed a period of anticipation—a time when the ideas in the journals seemed fun and I looked forward to sharing them with others. The ideas continued to be fun, but the notion of how to present these ideas to others became equally as important in the years to come. I discovered that my enjoyment of and experimentation with teaching strategies and approaches were not always viewed in such a positive light by some of my colleagues. There were times when simply being enthusiastic about new approaches to teaching and learning was not enough. I had to learn how to dance with each partner based on their own philosophies and personal practical knowledge. I had to start with them and their needs and not with me and my own desires. I could not deliver the differentiated instruction message as a “box of tricks.” I had to treat my work as a human endeavour, with much complexity and variation.

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) illuminated some of the complexity of this dance between the excitement of new knowledge and the difficulty of passing on this information when they discussed sacred stories that exist on educational landscapes. The sacred theory-practice story, while challenging to name, seems to be about the taken-for-grantedness of the role of externally imparted theory to inform change in the education system. This sacred story turns into a system story, where change is championed and programs and professional development are designed to encourage a constant examination of teaching practice. This story values the knowledge adopted or claimed by the system over the teacher’s knowledge. This story is then passed onto teachers through a conduit, where the intent is to inform school-based educators of what they should be doing. My role was to be a “knower” within the system story—to explain differentiated

instruction, assessment, curricula, and the connection of all of this to student learning. I had been given the task of asking difficult questions of teachers about their practice and then providing the “correct” answers. This task, or system conduit message, assumed teachers’ current personal practical knowledge was incorrect or incomplete in some way. It assumed teachers would need to improve their practice, and the best way to do this was to practice differentiation in their classrooms.

It did not take me long to figure out I wanted to be a “knower” of the system story of differentiation. I wanted to be someone who had the answers. I did not want to be in the position of my colleagues. My identity rested on being a good teacher, and once I accepted that a differentiated classroom was a sign of an excellent teacher, I wanted to be able to say I provided a differentiated experience for my students. I wanted to get a “head start” on the “knowing,” and in the beginning I enjoyed this perceived advantage. I felt eager to know more because I sensed the more I knew, the better able I would be to do the job I was being asked to do. It was only later, when I recognized this knowing could create the perception of a hierarchy of understanding between the people with whom I was working and me, I began to realize my identity did not rest solely in the place of the “knower.” I was uncomfortable with any perception that could potentially erode the trust I was trying so hard to build with my colleagues in their classroom spaces. I also found I was unable to accept the sacred and system stories without first laying them alongside my own stories. I had difficulty being the conduit.

In reality, knowing flowed in multiple directions between the conduit, my colleagues, and me. I spent time presenting at staff meetings, handing out professional readings, and working with teachers on their planning and teaching. However, knowing also seemed to flow into me from many other places, including both the conduit and the teachers with whom I

worked. I was dancing very quickly in order to learn the steps I would soon be teaching others. I felt I had to read vast amounts of literature and attend conferences to try to bring my knowing to the levels of educational researchers and divisional leaders. I practiced many things I learned within my own safe classroom spaces. I strove to test aspects of the conduit message before delivering it to others. As a result, I ended up in a multi-faceted place of knowing. I constantly and often rapidly, received knowledge from the conduit and worked hard to make it part of my personal practical knowledge. I then became the “knower” who passed on knowledge to my colleagues. I was both a receiver and a transmitter of the conduit’s sacred and system stories. I became an extension of the conduit that initially had fed my knowing and this created a tension for me. I quickly learned that change was about much more than receiving and transmitting information. It was, in fact, about learning and teaching. Furthermore, the learner and teacher roles moved back and forth from me to my colleagues to our students throughout our time together. The roles were not firm and, as a result, the flow of messages within the conduit became convoluted and multi-directional.

The more I worked within classroom spaces with my colleagues, the more I began to discover the complexity of this multi-faceted place of knowing. I discovered that my colleagues, too, had personal practical knowledge. They, too, had lived stories in their classroom spaces. Their knowledge began to flow back to me, and the assumptions implicit within the conduit message began to show. I soon came to see that the conduit message was too simple. It did not reflect the knowledge that existed for teachers prior to my attempts to introduce new knowledge. I began to realize if I was going to create truly shared spaces, I would need to honour the knowledge that my colleagues brought into our shared time. The knowing would have to flow many ways.

This multi-faceted place of knowing was challenging for me and for my shifting identity. Literature by Clandinin and Connelly (1995) helped me to understand myself in relation to my knowing and, ultimately, in relation to my need to pass this knowledge onto others. Just as I had sensed sacred stories from researchers and the facilitators of the project, I in turn served as the conduit through which this same information or “knowing” was passed onto teachers and students. Once I realized the sacred story of the conduit was suggesting I could deliver the system story without any consideration for my own knowledge or the knowledge of others, things became much more difficult. I began to question information I read and was given at our DI PLC, and my positioning in relation to it. I felt almost rebellious at being asked to deliver the DI philosophy without discussing it or testing it on my own, in my safe classroom space. I was reluctant to share this knowledge until I felt it was my own knowledge, based on my own experiences.

Early in the first months of the job, I questioned aspects of the Project only within myself and in the safety of my family. I tried to cope with my feelings of ambivalence about the tension between the conduit message and the personal practical knowledge held by me and my colleagues. I shared with teachers only those things I felt fit with my own current understanding within my practice. I decided to be a conduit for only those aspects of the Project message that had become my personal practical knowledge. This helped me to feel more honest in my work with other teachers, but it also motivated me to move quickly in learning new things, trying them out, and seeking feedback as to how they affected teachers and students. I wanted to have a large pool of teaching experiences from which to pull ideas to share with others.

My decision to “test drive” the DI philosophy in my own classroom and to share only what I felt comfortable sharing begins to explain my dependence on feedback within my role.



Part of me wanted feedback from the students and their teachers to confirm my position as “knower.” Another part of me struggled to clarify what “effective” might mean in the context of my new role. I wanted the people with whom I actually spent my days to tell me how I was doing. Once I decided to question the assumptions of the conduit and elements of its message, I needed to look elsewhere for signs of change.

This dependence on feedback also begins to explain my early feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. I discovered the challenge of being the conduit when I felt I knew so little. It was as if I was trying to teach people to dance when I had a small understanding of the dance steps, had little understanding of how they were to fit together, and had no idea of the tempo or style of music, whom my partners would be, or what they would know about the dance. I struggled for a long while with presenting myself as a knower, while inside feeling unsure of what I knew, what I believed, and how I could change others when I was changing so fast myself.

### **The educational research choreography**

*The school system is somehow or another imagined to be a kind of playground for innovation for the public, policy makers, and researchers with new and ingenious ideas. But what appears in the stories we have, and what might appear to be the case more generally, is that innovation, new ideas, must be sanctioned by the existing ideology of the conduit. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, pp. 174-175)*

The literature on differentiation is clear—if teachers establish student-readiness, pre-assess student skill and knowledge, and differentiate instruction to meet the varying needs of students in a class, increased student learning will occur more consistently (Hedrick, 2005; Hertberg & Brighton, 2005; Lewis & Batts, 2005; O’Connor, 2007; Silver, 2005; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis & Chappuis, 2006; Tomlinson, 2005; Tomlinson, Brimijoin & Narvaez, 2008; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). As Tomlinson (2005) said, “...there are certain heuristics or

guides for differentiation, which, if followed, are likely to assist teachers in developing defensible and effective practice that responds to the needs of diverse learners” (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 263). In fact, she asserted, “...that most students can learn most things under the right circumstances” (p. 265).

Very early on in my position, I felt the weight of these assertions. It began to feel that the voices of some of the researchers were saying that in cases where success was not being experienced by students, it could be traced back to teachers and their approaches to teaching and learning. I began to wonder how teachers with whom I would be sharing a classroom space would interpret assertions such as these. There had been many instances in public staff spaces when I heard teachers making the exact opposite assertion—that in fact, it was the fault of the student when learning had not occurred. I heard them say that perhaps the students had not studied enough or were lazy or did not care enough. I felt caught between the teachers, the students, and the conduit. I began to wonder if both teachers and students could share the responsibility for difficult learning moments. I began to sense that no person could hold the whole answer to such difficult issues.

This caused immediate tension for me in my understanding of myself in my DI role. If I did not hold the answers, then what was I hoping to do with teachers? I began to worry about delivering the message of the differentiation research to my colleagues without implying that their own philosophies and understandings were flawed. I began to wonder how many of their comments outside their classrooms were personal philosophies and how many were cover stories intended to explain some of their worries away. I began to see I would have to enter into difficult discussions about actual student learning and how much of this learning, regardless of the degree, was a product of teaching.

Another area of differentiation research in which I found myself immersed centered on the topic of assessment. In the past, this area of my practice often gave me cause to reflect and, at times, feel dissatisfied. I was eager to read about ways to improve my own assessment practices. There was no shortage of research in this area. I read the work of Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis and Chappuis (2006), O'Connor (2007), and Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) to keep current in my understanding of assessment practices. As Greene (1995) stated, "Standards, assessment, outcomes, and achievement: these concepts are the currency of educational discussion today" (p. 9). I eagerly explored literature on formative and summative assessment. Terms like assessment for learning, assessment as learning, common assessments, pre-assessments, and evaluation became part of my vernacular. I learned to dance around the masses of assessment terminology and clarify this information for my colleagues in our shared time together.

Before my voice spoke loudly enough for me to pay attention to it, I felt sure my new role was to steer teachers in the direction dictated by the conduit—to be a person who helped my colleagues interpret the conduit messages of change and the importance of data as part of that change. There were times in my own data collection and assessment when I heard the tiniest voice begin to wonder whether numbers were the only way to collect data, and whether students could also express their understanding in less standardized ways. However, my need to be a "knower" and be a conduit of the research overshadowed that small voice for quite some time. It was not until months later that I was able to blend my knowledge of the assessment and differentiated literature with my own understanding and experience with learning. Only later could I find a place for both the voices of the researchers and my own voice.

## **The Project choreography**

*Frequently, these “rhetorics” conflict with previous rhetorics that have come down the tubes. Yet I am expected to embrace mandates, even conflicting ones, and enact them as if they did not conflict, and as if they were my own. But they are not my own; I have experienced no agency in their production. Rather, I have been an instrument being used to do someone else’s bidding. (Craig, in Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 23)*

Until I found my own voice amid the voice of research and literature, much of my energy was concentrated on organizing my newly discovered understanding about differentiation and assessment into manageable chunks for teachers. I had a desire to design an order for presenting information at staff meetings and in shared spaces with teachers in a way that would clarify the philosophy of differentiation and provide practical suggestions for making it work. I felt the burning desire to keep relationships strong with my colleagues, though I often was not sure how to do that while still adhering to the agenda of the Project which required significant development of DI understanding by all staff in all DI schools.

This challenge was made more complicated by my perception of a dichotomy between sharing and enhancing the profile of the DI philosophy and developing and sustaining relationships with teachers which would allow this to happen. I felt the challenge of blending the two was seldom acknowledged by the facilitators of the Project. They had not made the same discoveries as I had because they were not positioned where they could see the teachers and students. They had accepted the sacred story and their place in the system. I felt I was standing in a place on my educational landscape where I could see needs of my colleagues when the people feeding the conduit could not. Tension developed as I continued to get to know teachers and their students and realized the sacred and system stories did not take into account their

knowledge. As a result, my work and the struggles associated with it became largely a private challenge, supported occasionally by my DI colleagues in conversations away from the DI PLC.

Much of the focus of discussion during our DI PLC time was centered on the philosophy itself and was rarely on the challenges of sharing this philosophy on our school landscapes. We did not discuss the difficulty in encouraging our colleagues to test their own philosophies. We failed to suggest that a shared philosophy could be co-constructed by facilitators and teachers instead of imposed by us. We neglected to articulate the grief some of us were feeling at moving into shared spaces and disrupting comfortable relationships we had already developed with colleagues outside the shared space. It was unacceptable to describe the trepidation we were feeling at leaving our relatively isolated professional existence and moving into shared spaces with others. The sharing of spaces was new both for us as DI Facilitators, and for classroom teachers. Tomlinson, Brimijoin and Navaruez (2008) clarified aspects of this unexpected degree of emotional response to change:

We are unaware of or unprepared to deal with the implications of change in classroom practice. We tend to deal with the change on a superficial level, tend to neglect fidelity to the change, and are often unprepared to deal with the fear, tension, loss, and conflict that inevitably accompany change. (p.11)

However, the changes in our experiences on the school landscape and any conflict we were feeling could not be discussed. Goffman (1959) explained the perceived necessity of this silence when he wrote, “The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each person concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service” (p. 9). Our DI PLC felt a need to accept the group mission without articulating our challenges, in order to feel unified in our commitment

to the Project. The literature we were reading paid much attention to the changes we were proposing but little attention to the people involved in the change. Not one resource acknowledged the shifts in identity a facilitator of change might experience and how this might shape their future work.

Hertberg and Brighton (2005) further clarified the difficulty of what we were attempting, “The mixed responses from teachers are understandable; for many teachers, differentiating instruction requires a considerable shift in classroom practices and, often, in deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning” (p. 43). I began to sense, as the conduit of this new and often disruptive information, I was sometimes viewed differently than I had been as a classroom teacher. This shift in my perception of how others were seeing me caused a shift in my identity. I had become a “knower” and, as a result, became different to my colleagues. When safe spaces stayed secret and shared spaces were rife with cover stories and comfortable conversations, the relationships I developed on staff stayed comfortable. As soon as I took on the DI Project role of someone who pushed past the familiar within a shared space, my position on my school landscape changed. Some colleagues became cautious around me, afraid to share any part of who they really were in their classrooms and take the risk of moving past secret stories in safe spaces and cover stories in public spaces.

This change caused me, and I believe other members of our DI PLC, difficulty and even sadness. Some of us began to question openly with one another our decision to take on this role. In October of my first year in the Project, I wrote:

...I am feeling quite disillusioned with my Differentiated Instruction job. It could be because I am overextended. It could be because I am forced to “cool my heels” until we give our initial “Where are we at?” survey to our division teachers so we can assess

growth. Or it could be because of the thinking I've been doing in relation to this [university] class. Likely a combination. I feel very directionless and yet immensely responsible for growth in instructional skill and student learning. When I had my "aha" moment last week in [university] class, it triggered my admission of this frustration. I am sick of data collection, surveys, missions, visions. I long to just teach. (personal journal, October, 2006)

In my first year within the PLC, I felt an increasingly strong division between my acceptance of the DI message and my role as the conduit that delivered it. I did not question the power of differentiated instruction or the value of my new understanding of assessment. However, I felt discomfort with my position in such a large level of change on my school landscape. I felt resentment in my DI PLC meetings when we were not invited to discuss our fears and concerns. I perceived the voice of the facilitators of the DI PLC as supporting the move forward without questioning the journey. I observed in my field texts, "Teachers are discouraged from personalizing the conduit materials, no debate allowed" (field notes, spring, 2007). We were asked to keep the destination in view and discouraged from looking at the scenery along the way. The music was playing and we were charged with the task of teaching everyone the dance. The problem was I was not sure I knew how to teach the steps and I was not sure I wanted to learn.

### **After the silence, my voice speaks**

*...doors had only been closed before because I hadn't realized that I was the one person in the world with the authority to open them. (Coelho, 2006, p. 204)*

For months in my first year as a DI Facilitator, I attempted to listen to the voices of the

literature and the facilitators of our DI PLC. I learned about the differentiated philosophy, about assessment, and I worked hard to test out the information in my safe classroom space. I failed as often as I succeeded in my attempts to have a differentiated classroom, and I began to see the complexity of creating an environment that maximized learning for all students.

Added to the complexity of this task was the even greater difficulty I was having with my feelings about my role on my school landscape. My relationships with my colleagues changed and I was not sure I liked this new way of being within my school. I often felt the stress of my role. In October of my second year I observed, “This job is really hard sometimes. It’s hard to push into comfort zones—even newly formed ones. That’s what I did today—I pushed into a newly formed comfort zone” (personal journal, October, 2007).

I had been working with Beth for over a month. We had done some great planning together and I had been thrilled at her openness to the new curriculum we were using and to thinking about how her students were and were not learning. She had acknowledged the difficulty of some of the changes we had made to her instruction but she had also willingly taken risks. We developed an ease with each other both during the time we were team-teaching and during our discussion time following lessons. For a few days prior to this journal reflection, I had gone into her room and felt a little like she did not need me in her class anymore. I was starting to be unsure of where to go next. On the day of the journal entry, following a relatively successful lesson, I decided to ask some deeper questions about student learning. Despite the feeling I had that Beth had really tried many new things, I took the chance and pushed past her newly formed comfort with some of the strategies we had tried, and encouraged her to continue to look for evidence of student learning after each lesson. I proposed that not everything we designed would always be successful. Part of me felt I was being counter-productive. I had



worked so hard to encourage her to make changes in her practice and now I was proposing they might not all be working. I worried Beth would abandon me and any success she was feeling. She did not abandon me, but my anticipation of negative consequences was a sign of insecurity in this process of change.

My position of DI Facilitator was largely one of trial and error throughout the first two years. I struggled to know when to praise and when to push. I was challenged with presenting myself as having knowledge but at the same time, showing my vulnerability and admitting occasional lack of success with strategies that were not helpful to all students. It was sometimes difficult to appear competent while feeling incompetent at various times throughout my days. Goffman (1959) described the challenge of my endeavour in theatrical terms:

When the individual does move into a new position in society and obtains a new part to perform, he is not likely to be told in full detail how to conduct himself, nor will the facts of his new situation press sufficiently on him from the start to determine his conduct without giving further thought to it. Ordinarily he will be given only a few cues, hints and stage directions, and it will be assumed that he already has in his repertoire a large number of bits and pieces of performances that will be required in the new setting. (p. 72)

I felt unable to express my concerns about my lack of confidence to their fullest in my DI PLC, and I began to develop cover stories to share in our PLC meeting time. I felt pressure to present myself as always competent and knowing. On our group Blackboard forum, where we were asked to electronically share reflections, successes and wonders, I worked very hard to be positive. This forum was clearly a public forum with our reflections occasionally being selected for sharing in other spaces. We needed to temper our comments in this light. This understanding made me attentive to how I presented myself. When I asked a question or posed a wonder, I was

careful about how I worded it, in order to not give too much away about my ambivalent feelings and my fear of inadequacy.

I was not always dancing amid tensions. There were times when I was able to bypass a cover story and present my personal beliefs because they were genuinely positive. This was easier at certain times than at others. For example, I felt convinced the kind of professional development we were advocating was one of the greatest strengths of the Project. When I worked with Beth, we were in a shared classroom space. Together, we held the common purpose of increasing student learning. We were able to try multiple strategies, searching through resources and literature, trying aspects of our reading that seemed to resonate for the needs of students in the classroom. The idea of working alongside a colleague in a shared space where we could try new approaches in a supportive and inquiring relationship was one of the most intense and positive forms of professional development I had ever been part of. I felt good about not ‘training’ teachers, as is often the case in other kinds of professional development. I was not standing at the front of Beth’s room, telling her how things should and should not be. Instead, we worked alongside each other, discussing every lesson in its complexity. Tomlinson, Brimijoin and Navaraez (2008) clarified the importance of this approach, “The scope of learning and change required of teachers who make significant progress toward differentiation absolutely requires focused professional development that takes place in an environment of safety and collegial learning” (p. 64). I viewed my role as one of co-constructing knowledge through shared instructional experiences. It was easy to recognize the value of this aspect of the Project and I found myself trying to present experiences and understanding in a genuinely positive light.

It was only in my secret time with certain DI colleagues, that I could give voice to my fears, concerns, and grief. I recognized that our PLC facilitators were asking for a very specific

destination. DI was to permeate all classrooms, assessment was to become authentic, and students were to demonstrate increased success. However, I often felt unsupported by the one dimensionality of the conduit on this journey. While the original eight DI Facilitators spoke secretly about our fears of losing our place on our school landscapes, of not knowing enough, and of not doing enough, open discussions did not occur often in our first year PLC group. My critical friend wrote the following comment after reading pieces of my inquiry,

Katie, do you wonder how much more we would have grown, had we been allowed the voice we craved?? I think we all would have crawled out from our ‘cover’ stories...I perhaps should have shed those cover stories immediately in front of the PLC. (personal communication, 2008)

We expressed the desire to speak openly, but these feelings were not part of the sacred story, and therefore, were never spoken of. We were not invited to discuss changes in our own beliefs about who we were within our schools, and even within our profession. Even though my identity changed drastically over two years in my school as a DI Facilitator, I rarely felt supported in giving voice to this change.

There came a point amid this internal turmoil, when I began to wonder about the secret stories inside the safe spaces of all teachers. Inside these safe spaces, I wondered which voices have the most volume for teachers. Does the volume belong to the voice of the research and literature? Or do we most strongly hear the voices of our colleagues? Is it the voice of the students we attend to most, or is it the voice of our experiences and our identity—is it our own voices that are heard most clearly? I wondered whether one voice needed to be attended to more than another, and whose voices we should be paying attention to in the midst of change. I wondered whose voice I was paying attention to in the midst of my own identity shifting or

whether it was, in fact, the tensions between and among all voices that gave me the most insight. I began to see the power of the many voices in education, and began to search for my own voice dancing among the rest. As it turned out, the power of this search and the volume of my voice rested in my thesis exploration. Let us now move back to the balcony and survey the inception of my research methodology.

### **Spotlight moment: The dance of data**

*My memory of my first year DI PLC action research project is made up of three parts. Each part clearly illustrates the struggle I felt in being part of a sacred story while trying to find my voice hidden among the static of conduit messages.*

*We were told about the action research component of the project at our very first PLC meeting. It was near the end of the meeting, after we had been informed of our status as effective teachers and had been told of the expectations for our own professional development and for the data collection required as part of the Project. I remember the room we were in was cold and white and bright. I also remember being tired and scared and overwhelmed. I had only a passing understanding of differentiated instruction and all it encompassed. I was really worried about working with my staff in this new capacity and the responsibility for change that I felt during this initial meeting was overwhelming. Mostly though, I remember resisting the idea of action research. I was quickly realizing I had been in no way prepared for what this DI job really was.*

*When we were told about action research, I took very little time to express resistance to the idea. We were asked to choose a topic of personal interest and collect quantitative data at the beginning of our work and then again at the end to show measureable growth in some aspect of student learning. We were told this would prove the effectiveness of differentiated instruction*

*for students and that this, in turn, would go a long way to sustaining our Project. While I did not disagree with the assertion that growth in student outcomes was our ultimate objective, I felt it was definitely not fair to hold us accountable to this growth when our job was to work with our colleagues. I felt it was accountability once removed. I also wondered how collecting data on a single aspect of student learning would prove the effectiveness of something so complex and varied in nature as differentiated instruction. However, my initial frustration at the notion of action research was futile. It was made clear to us that this was how we were going to prove the necessity of the Project and of differentiated instruction in classrooms. I had no choice but to delve into an action research project.*

*My struggle to find a suitable action research project was magnified by my desire to somehow marry my research to a potential thesis. I had listened to the advice of a fellow Masters student who urged me to choose a thesis topic I could piggyback with work I was doing in the field. I bounced from idea to idea. I was interested in gifted students, in students who finish their work early, and then in how students perceive their own learning and how this perception differed from that of their teachers. I knew I would be expected to collect data that would yield graphs and measured outcomes. Yet, I felt a strong desire to listen to the voices of children. I worked hard to find a way to measure their perceptions and ended up with a survey tool of fourteen questions, which asked students to rate their learning experiences in their classes, their experiences with assessment, and their perceptions of learning. At the end of the survey, I added five questions for students to write their recollections of ways they had been taught and assessed.*

*Sometime in October of that initial year, I remember meeting with Steve, one facilitator of our PLC group, to share my survey. I respected Steve's understanding of action research, and*

*I listened eagerly for his advice. He gave me some feedback as to how to focus my research but in the end, I mostly continued as planned. I remember feeling relief when I finally decided on my topic and was able to put it in the required SMART goal format<sup>4</sup> (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 18). It read, “By May 31, 2007, through various strategies intended to encourage metacognition and reflection by students, to improve student interest and understanding of learning on 5 out of 14 survey indicators.”*

*I then set about giving the survey to over 150 students in my school, collating data, and trying to figure out what I was seeing. Even when I discovered early on the survey tool I had designed had some flaws and, perhaps, did not reflect what I anticipated, I still forged ahead. I had a sense that my survey sample was too large but I was unclear, really, as to what I was going to do with the results and in the end I decided more was better.*

*The second part of my memory encompasses my struggle with the results. In April, I was asked to take the results I had gathered and create graphs that would demonstrate growth in student outcomes. I struggled with the sheer volume of results and I also struggled with how to represent growth using my data. I was unclear, in the beginning, about what I was trying to show. The results seemed to illustrate general student dissatisfaction with schooling. Students could not really remember how they had been taught or assessed much of the time. They were bored and felt they were not being consulted about learning styles and preferences. None of this surprised me, which led me to wonder why I had done all the work to collect the data.*

*I knew, from anecdotal feedback at the end of units, that students had diverse experiences at school, and I felt this feedback, in their words and more situation-specific, was more valuable to me than the survey results. I also began to notice the degree to which student perceptions did*

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<sup>4</sup> Strategic and specific, measureable, attainable, results-based and time-bound

*not match teacher perceptions and I began to wonder if examining this would have been a more valuable action research project. Nevertheless, I was well into my original project and the task remained to graph my data and present it to my DI PLC.*

*After wrestling with the raw data and entering numbers into Excel spreadsheets, I desperately asked Steve to visit me again at my school to help me sort out this process. I was doubtful he could offer me a solution to the problem of too much data and not enough clarity in measureable student growth. However, he was clear that I had much valuable data to work with and he helped me group it to make comparisons. We looked at improvements in student perceptions after I had spent time in the classroom as a DI Facilitator minimally, moderately, and intensely. I was able to create sixteen different graphs from the results.*

*Over the next two weeks, I laboured in the computer lab at our school from 3:30 until 5:00 almost every day to try to put together a report for my DI PLC that was acceptable as action research. I included preambles and analyses for each data comparison. I cited percentages and quantitative data that would prove my effectiveness inside classroom spaces. I felt frustration bordering on anger at the amount of time it took me to prepare my report. I also felt frustrated at the quantitative requirement. In a moment of rebellion, I added on sample anecdotal comments from students which I pulled from our post-unit feedback sheets.*

*I could not see how this degree of work was a reasonable expectation of the Project, but I also had nothing against which to compare my experience. I dutifully copied my report, handed one to my principal and vice principal and prepared to take the rest to our PLC meeting.*

*The third part of my memory begins at the PLC meeting where action research was to be shared. Our meeting was held at a school an hour away. In this new setting, I felt removed from my own educational landscape and the responsibility I felt while there. I wandered through the*

*halls of the new school, examining bulletin boards and peering into classes to see what was happening. When I finally settled in the classroom where our PLC was meeting, I made a spontaneous decision. I decided to put aside the charts and graphs in my presentation and tell the story of my recent experiences in classrooms. I decided to tell the story of my spotlight moment when I had shared the classroom space with my principal, and we had asked students for feedback on the Project. I thought it was important to explain how this particular experience and the entire Project had invited me to examine my own philosophies, inadequacies, and fears. I wanted our group to be able to reflect on our difficult work throughout our first year. I desperately wanted our group to move past our cover stories and I thought my honesty might be a springboard for this.*

*Other DI Facilitators presented before me. Some presentations were fully quantitative with graphs clearly demonstrating student growth displayed on the screen at the front of the room. These projects were much smaller in scope and were far more sequential than the one I attempted. I began to see how action research could look and I felt frustration at having laboured for so long over something so unmanageable without someone guiding me. I became more certain I did not want to share my report but I also felt scared about sharing my personal story.*

*One other facilitator had also struggled with the action research and she had no quantitative graphs to show. She simply had the words of her students written around the edge of her handout. Her presentation gave me strength.*

*When it was my turn, I pulled a chair to the middle front of the room and sat on it. I had my lengthy and detailed report in my hand and I waved it in the air and explained how I had done the required work. I then went on to share my story of the DI Project and my identity shift*



*over the course of the year. The attentive faces of my colleagues were encouraging and I attempted to be as honest as I could about my experiences. I peeled away my cover story and shared my voice. My DI colleagues asked many questions and my presentation went over time.*

*From the beginning, I sensed one facilitator of the Project was uncomfortable with my presentation. I never once saw her open my report and I began to feel I had been too bold in my approach. In an email prior to this meeting, she stated to the PLC, “Not everyone is like Katie and using this for her Masters—most are doing simple research and finding usable learnings about students” (personal communication, 2007). As a result of this statement, I imagined she had a problem with my action research and this only confirmed her fear that I had not done what was expected.*

*Her imagined voice inside my head blended with my own insecurities and I immediately regretted my decision. Later, when she summarized our action research for a report, her summary of my work stated, “Katie’s study results were inconclusive partly because of their nature. Katie was able to gather a great deal of helpful anecdotal data from student comments” (personal communication, 2007).*

This event illustrated important revelations in my journey to a shifted identity. I could not accept quantitative research as the only way to demonstrate success in my job. I also realized quantitative data would not be the methodology for my thesis research. It did not mean enough to me, personally. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) clarified, “We found ourselves quantifying what interested us, and of course, as we quantified experience, its richness and expression was stripped away” (p. xxvi). I looked at my action research document, with its graphs and its numbers, and I could feel the richness of my experiences in classrooms with teachers and students disappear. I needed to tell my story. I needed to tell the story of the teachers and

students with whom I worked, using their voices. I needed to find my narrative voice because, “...in narrative thinking, *the person* in context is of prime interest” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 32).

This spotlight moment also revealed another aspect of my identity that was, and still is, a source of frustration for me. Despite making the decision to present in the way I did for sound reasons, the imagined disdain of my group facilitator had more impact on me than I would have liked. I discovered that her feedback and my subsequent reflection were a double-edged sword. On one hand, imagining her voice pushed me to look deeply into my beliefs and my practices, enabling me to explore who I was as a teacher. On the other hand, there were times when her voice was the only voice I allowed myself to hear and, at times, her voice was only imagined. Nevertheless, disapproval of something I had done caused me much doubt about myself and the strength of my beliefs. I allowed the imagined voice of my group facilitator to influence how I felt for the rest of the day, and ultimately, how I felt about action research. Miller (2005) described the challenge in what I was experiencing, “There were, of course, several dangers in such a perception of myself. One, of course, was that I existed only in relation to others and their perception of me” (p. 73). Pulling my own voice out from behind the imagined voices of others was a struggle. As Miller wrote, “...it is easy to remain scattered, in fragments, unwilling and unable at times to muster the energy required for agency. The new ways of knowing can be strange, alien, and frightening” (p. 76).

My struggle to listen to my own voice, to even find it, was part of my journey. Discovering the reasons for my compulsion to judge myself based on the perceived responses of others was a constant battle. Miller (2005) captured the complexity of this conflict:

I have waited and watched for signs of myself to return and to enter the spaces that I have

been filling with the needs, desires, and requests of others. I now think that, in those moments, I was trying to protect myself, not from the intrusions of others, but against further alienation from myself. (Miller, 2005, p. 80)

I struggled with the idea of whose knowledge counted in my work. I felt caught between the mandate of the DI Project and what my own stories were teaching me. I wanted to ask for feedback from the teachers and students on my landscape in order to construct some meaning from the experiences we all were having in our shared spaces. However, I continually felt the push from the conduit to impose a particular knowing onto my colleagues just as that same conduit had pushed a particular knowing about action research onto me.

In my second year, I chose an action research project that fit into the expected requirements of the Project. I no longer wanted to put my energy into resisting the action research. I decided to conform to the type of action research that was expected, and because I had seen some of these projects the previous year I had a clearer sense of how the research should look according to the Project facilitators. I chose research that centered on journaling by students, but the results were easily measured and graphs were easily produced. Instead of standing by my beliefs and my desire for a qualitative research experience, I chose action research that would invite praise and support from the Project's facilitators. Their perception of my job performance was important to me and I found another venue for my qualitative research preference in my thesis work. I continued to question aspects of the Project but I recognized that completing the research in the accepted format would, in the end, be less work both physically and mentally. I felt exhausted from the strain of asking too many questions and feeling rejected for doing so. I decided to direct my energy to other aspects of my job, and I reserved most of my doubts for my journal and my graduate studies inquiry.

The fact that I learned a great deal from both my first and second year of action research further complicates my interpretation of the spotlight moment in my identity shifting. While my memory of that first year presentation day is an uncomfortable one, I cannot conclude that doing the project was not valuable. In this case, despite not enjoying the dance I was doing, I learned much about dance in general and how I would choose to dance in the future both in the Project and in my thesis inquiry. The lessons learned were quite different each year, but the richness of these action research projects for me personally, not to mention the students with whom I worked, cannot be denied. Both projects were part of my personal growth and have become part of my personal practical knowledge. The tensions that resulted from my approaches to this work are what caused shifts in my identity. When I chose to present my first year findings in a narrative way, I learned much about how my thesis research would unfold. I also learned that I was willing to “go against the grain” but I wanted approval for doing so. I was uncomfortable in this oppositional role. I wanted to dance in my own way but I was not comfortable ignoring the music and the people playing it. The same was true for my DI colleague who had presented her findings qualitatively. The following year she, too, produced the required graphs. It became too cumbersome to oppose the system. It caused too great a negative presence in our DI lives to continue. While the tensions created in holding back my desire to story my DI experiences never left me, I gave up the desire to do so in my DI PLC.

### **Moving out of the frenzied dance**

*...the change journey has been both evolutionary and revolutionary, both frustrating and exhilarating, both depleting and renewing. In the end, it has been reconstructing in highly positive ways. We are not through learning, but we believe that what we have learned to this point is worth sharing. (Tomlinson, Brimijoin & Narvaez, 2008, p. xiv)*

When I move outside myself once again, stand on the balcony, and imagine watching myself on the dance floor during my first year, I see a dance teacher who was frenzied and unsure of herself. She was enthusiastic, but sometimes her smile did not reach her eyes as she moved her way through each dance with partner after partner. She continually strove to learn the dance steps before meeting with her partners, and this sometimes proved a challenge. She thought she should like all the music being played and she thought she had to convince others of this sacred truth. It was a time filled with the noise of many voices clamouring for attention and she did not know where her own voice fit.

Despite how much I had to struggle to ensure my voice was heard, I do acknowledge that elements of the sacred and system stories being piped through the conduit had some value. The story of DI was instructive in giving me a new language with which to communicate and reflect. It offered me a way of thinking about teaching and learning that made sense to me. It was relatively easy to look at differentiated instruction as a beneficial way to explore my own classroom experiences. Where the challenge occurred was the degree to which the literature around differentiated instruction became the system story. The literature was one-dimensional. Reading about a dance is vastly different from doing the dance. When we find ourselves on a dance floor, there are many factors that impact the dance we are prepared to do, despite the degree to which the literature has offered us a vision.

The information around DI did not cause tension for me, but the way in which the Project functioned did. The conduit was a massive force and it presented a systemic ideal based on a sacred story. It presupposed teachers needed to become better. It presupposed they would all be ready to do so and would welcome imposed knowledge as a means to arriving at an end. It

presupposed the students in their classes would also all welcome these changes. It presupposed the facilitators of change would remain unchanged themselves, in their time in shared spaces. The conduit message did not take into account the personal practical knowledge of the Facilitators or their teacher colleagues. It did not examine what happens when conflict arises between peers. It did not take into account how students would feel or respond in this whole process.

I entertained the idea that some elements of my discomfort might be an inevitable aspect of any time of great change. In fact, I began to wonder whether it might be essential to feel that degree of discomfort if philosophical changes were going to occur. Nevertheless, I could not shake the feeling that the system story could have been more flexible. I recognized that the people shaping the conduit were also caught up in a conduit of their own. They had come to accept the sacred story and were responding to it in a complex, human way. However, I felt the conduit and the people shaping it did not attend to the fidelity of the relationships between the members of the shared spaces. The magnitude and complexity of what we were attempting was not acknowledged by the conduit. The sacred and system stories did not attend to multiple experiences within a time of change. I knew the knowledge of the teachers I worked with had value in that it shaped the nature of our work. I knew that my own experiences invited a deeper understanding of differentiated instruction and the work I was doing as a facilitator.

I began to wonder to what degree the work I was doing was a perpetuation of the sacred and system stories and to what degree it was what I actually believed. I began to take apart the storied moments of my first year and question when the sacred and system stories moved from cover stories to stories of my personal practical knowledge. In effect, I began to search for my own voice and found it was not completely different from the system story—but it also was not

completely the same. I turned to the voices of teachers with greater commitment. I hoped their voices would lead me to a greater understanding of myself and to who I could be in my DI role.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Teacher partners, will you dance?

*The real Tradition is this: the teacher never tells the disciple what he or she should do. They are merely travelling companions, sharing the same uncomfortable feeling of “estrangement” when confronted by ever-changing perceptions, broadening horizons, closing doors, rivers that sometimes seem to block their path and which, in fact, should never be crossed but followed.*

*There is only one difference between teacher and disciple: the former is slightly less afraid than the latter. Then, when they sit down at the table or in front of a fire to talk, the more experienced person might say: “Why don’t you do that?” But he or she never says: “Go there and you’ll arrive where I did,” because every path and every destination is unique to the individual.*

*The true teacher gives the disciple the courage to throw his or her world off balance, even though the disciple is afraid of things already encountered and more afraid still of what might be around the next corner. (Coelho, 2006, p. 213)*

Many voices shouted for attention during my DI dance, and I needed to listen to them all. If I had heard only my own voice from beginning to end, I would not have grown and stretched like I did. The voices of the conduit—of the research, and of my DI PLC—were loud in my first year. They were the voices I thought held the most importance, or at least, the most answers to my many questions. However, they didn’t provide me with the information I most craved—understanding my day-to-day work as someone trying to facilitate change. Halfway through my first year, I had plenty of information about theory and hypothetical situations. I grew to know much about dance styles and the specific moves that were part of the dances, but I wanted to know how I was perceived by others to be dancing every day. To do that, I decided to turn to my teacher partners. I wanted to learn from their voices. I wanted to pause and reflect on each and every complex relationship with my colleagues and learn from that reflection. I wanted to inquire into my changing self in my safe classroom spaces and attend to how I changed again in



the shared spaces I was constructing with my teacher colleagues. I wanted to look at shared spaces that developed into productive, trusting, risk-taking experiences as well as shared spaces that never developed beyond cover stories, parallel experiences, and turn-taking. I needed to listen to the voices of my colleagues in order to hear my own changing voice of who I was becoming as a teacher.

### **Building a dance**

*I was an inside observer with whom teachers sometimes shared feelings, attitudes, assumptions, or questions about school reform. Sometimes I was a trusted confidante to whom certain teachers could reveal, without worry of retribution, their hesitation about participating in pilot reform pedagogies. At other times, I was an outsider, a threat to teachers who perceived the reform research as a way of evaluating them, of recording the ease in which they did and did not conform to the school's conceptions of appropriate reform pedagogies. (Miller, 2005, p. 174)*

In my role as a DI Facilitator, I seemed to float between extreme existences. At times, I felt different from others on my staff. I felt as though they avoided me and my ideas. I felt as if people saw me as a teacher with passion but one who could not possibly understand the reality of others' teaching lives. I felt I was the source of much eye rolling and sighing. At other times, I felt like my colleagues respected my work. Once I began to work intensively with some teachers, I felt secret, safe spaces form around us and I felt a mutual acceptance and trust begin to develop. Navigating this dual existence of acceptance and non-acceptance, of secret shared spaces and public spaces became part of the challenge of my day-to-day work.

In my first year as a DI Facilitator in my middle and secondary school, I worked intensively with seven teachers and had varied contact with many more. I worked with more teachers than other DI Facilitators involved in the project, simply because of the nature of

working in a middle and secondary setting. Teachers at my school appeared more reluctant to be involved in intensive work for months on end. As well, because classes repeated every day, I had to follow the ebb and flow of the units and timetables of senior and middle years students and their teachers.

My second year in this role provided me with continued contact with a wide variety of teachers. I planned intensively with ten more, and team-taught with seven of them. Most teachers within my school approached me to discuss planning or instruction. Further, I continued to present aspects of the DI philosophy every month during staff meetings, and I continued to hand out readings I felt would be helpful to individual teachers. As a result of this depth of interaction with my colleagues, I felt I came to know many of them well on a professional level.

Despite this level of interaction with my colleagues, in my two years in the DI role I alternated between feeling like I had made gains in my goal of promoting differentiated instruction and feeling like I had completely alienated myself from my colleagues. Admittedly, the times of greatest difficulty in being accepted seemed to occur when I was sharing the DI philosophy in a public space, with more than one colleague present. A journal entry in January of my second year, after working with a school-based PLC, illustrated some of my times of struggle:

Over the next hour, we had a very in-depth discussion about how to choose goals based on the data and where they thought things were going. There was periodic resistance to ideas and some questioning of my philosophy and how practical it was. I would say I felt mostly outward support with some potential for passive resistance. We chose a goal that they seemed to agree on and I helped to create a rubric for the pre and post assessment. I then left.

When I returned to bring a message from a missing member, I felt two members of the group were not happy to see me again. One said, “What are you doing here? Why are you back?” It seemed a pretty half-hearted attempt at breezing it off as humour and one other person looked uncomfortable with the comments. I left quickly, feeling badly. (personal journal, September, 2008)

My attempts at working collaboratively in this PLC illustrate the challenges I faced in many public spaces on my school landscape. Whether it was in the staff room, in the hallway, or in meetings, I struggled to be part of the group and still feel welcome to share my knowledge and experiences. I felt a strong tension between the role I was given by the conduit as a “knower” and my desire to share in an environment of reciprocal inquiry.

### **Spotlight moment: Choreography on a Large Scale**

*We roll into the room, chattering in groups, gathering materials for the meeting and picking up the snack kindly prepared by our alternative education students. As I sit and wait for the meeting to start, I survey the expanding group, looking for signs of the mood that will be the umbrella for our meeting. I search for frustrated faces, pairs whispering furtively to each other, smiles that signal a successful teaching day.*

*I know I am near the end of the agenda and I dread my position. I worry that I will be rushed, needing to leave to take my daughters to their skating and art lessons. I know others will be feeling the same way. In the past, I have asked for my permanent slot to be closer to the beginning of the meeting but, today, other items will precede mine.*

*This time, I have a larger item to present. Our division-wide Differentiated Instruction Professional Learning Community has designed a Power Point presentation intended to help us*

*clarify our program, our mission, vision, values and goals, and to delve deeper into aspects of the DI philosophy. I hate Power Points. I find them constricting when I do not prepare them myself and I have had to deliver more than one designed by others in the past.*

*I am anxious about the presentation for another reason. I feel the Power Point contains information I have delivered before. I feel ready to make my presentations more school-specific and school-relevant. I am very worried about boring people. This has not been helped by comments from some staff members and administration about the length of my past presentations. I still have not been completely successful in convincing my staff I am required to deliver information at every staff meeting; it is part of my job.*

*These worries weigh heavily on my mind as the last few people file in to the room. I can see we are almost ready to begin and I can feel the fluttering of anxiety in my stomach. I know it will not be long before my neck starts to turn a patchy red. I am always frustrated by my body's response to these meetings. I speak in front of people all day, every day. Nevertheless, I just cannot shake my anxiety over presenting at our staff meetings.*

*The meeting progresses to my presentation and I have to fiddle a little with the LCD projector and the laptop to get things working. I breeze through the slides, offering commentary whenever I can, to personalize my presentation. My neck gets warm and I can tell I am flushed. I start to go more quickly, skipping over entire slides that are full of complex diagrams. I hate diagrams with small font and many arrows. The presentation ends with photographs of students in our division in the midst of a DI experience. I know some of our own students and teachers are in these slides so I relax.*

*As I finish, I apologize for both going too quickly and taking too long. I am relieved to be done with my portion of the agenda. I can hardly wait until business turns away from me.*

*I head back to my classroom after the meeting and check my email one last time before I head out to pick up my daughters. I am surprised to see an email from a colleague so soon after our meeting. The email reads:*

*Katie-*

*I just wanted to tell you that your presentations are never boring and dry! I always find you very interesting! I think one of my favourite phrases I've picked up from you is the bit about "you are in control of your own learning." I use that often.*

*Monique (personal communication, 2007)*

*I am humbled by this email. My attention is pulled away from my own insecurity and placed onto the needs of others. I am dismayed that, after all these years, I still forget to move out of myself and consider what others may be taking away from the work I am doing. I resolve to do better.*

I worried about staff meetings my entire first year. I felt pressured to use the scripted Power Points and presentations we had been provided, even when I did not connect with the method of presentation. Furthermore, addressing an entire staff when I knew each person in the room was in such a different place of understanding the message I was delivering created tension for me each and every month. I cared how my staff felt about the work I was doing. I cared professionally because the conduit asserted the need to be invited into classrooms. I wanted the story of the DI Project, as it existed on my school's landscape, to be one of collaboration and excitement. I also cared personally because many staff members were my friends. I worried about what DuFour (1997) warned of when he wrote, "Ultimately, they came to respond to the latest fad with a 'this-too-shall-pass' air of disinterested resignation" (p. 83). I did not want my colleagues to become resentful or even apathetic about the DI philosophy or me as the conduit of the information.

Tomlinson, Brimijoin and Narvaez (2008) clarified the challenge I faced in presenting to my staff when they wrote about "...beliefs and practices so acculturated, [that] anyone who shines a light on them risks being rejected by the group" (p. 187). I wanted to celebrate our successes, but I was always mindful of time constraints and the necessity to also present the required information. I wanted to hear the voices of others and I wanted to hear my own voice, but all I could present was the voice of the conduit. In fact, public spaces invited greater attention to the conduit than other spaces, and I felt pressured to deliver the sacred and system stories. After the staff meeting, when I felt frustrated at having to deliver another Power Point from the conduit, my principal approached me about my presentation. She asserted that regardless of my feelings about the Power Point, I needed to be enthusiastic about the message. I needed to deliver the sacred and system stories in a manner that would continue to garner support for DI and the Project.

In my second year, I was able to move into staff presentations that invited the voices of my colleagues to be heard. I arranged for "testimonials" by people who had danced the DI dance in their classes. The challenge rested in inviting teachers to be open about our secret shared stories in a public space. I carefully considered who to invite and I only did so when a teacher had expressed feelings of personal growth during our time together.

I remember Beth as one person who shared at a staff meeting at the beginning of my second year. I was surprised when she asked me to work with her on a unit on fractions, decimals, and percents. Part of a group piloting the new math curriculum, she asked me to help her plan a unit using Backward Design (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). I welcomed this invitation. She called herself "traditional" throughout the time I spent in her classroom. She clarified her discomfort with group work and manipulatives. She expressed a preference for

direct instruction and drill and practice. However, in our time together she exemplified so much change and growth in two months that I asked if she would be willing to offer a “testimonial” of our work together at a staff meeting. I wanted to celebrate her hard work in a public setting. I also wanted the staff to hear, from her perspective, how change had affected her. I wanted to move away from delivering the system story in the way the conduit required, and move into a more shared approach to exploring teaching practice. I think I also wanted Beth to convince people that our relationship was collaborative. I wanted her to help create a positive story of the DI Project on our staff, and I wanted people to believe working with me could be beneficial. I see now that this was probably too much to hope for, especially considering how I was positioned on my landscape by the conduit and considering the story of the DI Project that already existed. Nevertheless, I felt relieved at not having to deliver the system story myself in this public space.

I sometimes worried about the feelings of those teachers I did not ask to share their experiences in a public space. I worried they would feel judged. I sensed that even my act of choosing people to share positioned me in a different place than my colleagues. Despite my reservations, I still felt this was a far better method of delivering the philosophy. I wanted the message to be more specific and not to come solely from me. Mostly, in order to stop feeling like I was risking my place on our school’s landscape, I invited others to share the journey of the sacred story with me. I wanted to stop feeling so alone in my work. Gilbert (2006) wrote, “Sit quietly now and cease your relentless participation. Watch what happens” (p. 155). I hungered to sit and watch the dance for a while. I wanted to see how others viewed our dance. I wanted to retreat a little from the spotlight.

### **The dance redefined**

Despite my challenge in public spaces to be seen as a colleague who was “on their side,” I continued in more protected spaces to expand professional relationships, as teachers and I worked together intensively. An agreement with a teacher to share a classroom and planning space inevitably shifted our focus to one of relationship. I worked to build trust in order to facilitate growth and change. In some instances during our time together, teachers and I reached beyond our cover stories and came face-to-face with aspects of our teaching practice that were not resulting in the learning we desired for our students.

In retrospect, I realize I felt somewhat protected from the judgement of the conduit in these secret shared spaces and that maybe this was also true for my partner. Perhaps in a shared space, we could allow the conduit voice to fade a little and we could spend more time and energy focusing on our own voices and the voices of our students. Perhaps in these shared spaces, a teacher and I could create a new story of the DI Project—one in which we could both learn and grow.

Developing this trust took time and some false starts. My beginning relationships with my colleagues were similar to those of dance partners who come together for the first time. Our conversations were guarded and our movements together were tentative. Each of us was unsure of how to respond to the other. I knew we needed time to become familiar with each other’s style and knowledge; that it would be less than constructive to begin a dance relationship by pointing out each other’s weaknesses. Instead, I ensured we spent time talking and moving in order to understand each other; that we first established trust before we began to take risks and try moves new to our partnership. I realized that only after time with my colleagues could I hope



for a story of collaboration.

### **Spotlight moment: Stepping on each other's toes**

*There had been other times with other teachers when I had sensed discomfort. It had always passed. I pushed aside my concerns and stayed seated at the side of the room while Mark continued to instruct. The students worked their way through the introductory science lesson Mark and I had planned together and, while I could identify moments when I could have stood up and circulated, I decided not to. It seemed like Mark was just too aware of my presence in the room for this move to be seamless and part of the natural flow of the classroom. I was trying to blend in and become part of the shared space although there was no indication this was happening, even as the class progressed.*

*As I watched the independent work the students were undertaking near the middle of the class period, I saw many students sitting with their hands up and students who were done early. I decided, in a split second, that my coloured cards (red, yellow, green and orange) might make things easier for both Mark and the students. I snuck out of his classroom and scurried to my own classroom to get my coloured card container. I then quietly re-entered Mark's class and handed the cards out to the students. Mark and I had spoken about the cards earlier, during our planning session, and I hoped that providing them to the students would be useful and welcome.*

*I soon sensed Mark's discomfort with my action. He seemed to be even more flustered and ill at ease. As soon as I realized my mistake, I began to count down the minutes until the period's end, when I could escape his frustration and my own disappointment in myself. I knew I had not only failed to begin to create a shared space with Mark but, in fact, my actions and even my presence had made the likelihood of that occurring even less.*

*After I left Mark's room, I thought back to the day we had taken to plan together. We had spent three hours but, for some reason, our time felt really rushed. By the time the lunch hour bell rang, signalling the end of our planning session, I felt like I had driven us through every aspect of our time together. After going home for lunch and thinking about how I sensed Mark must be feeling, I rushed back to where he was supervising to tell him how sorry I was for speeding through our time together. He reassured me, saying he had found the session very beneficial. I shoved my worries to the back of my mind.*

*I did not ponder, until much later, how the rushed feel of our planning session was probably contributing to the lack of creation of a shared space together. We had not taken the time to develop our relationship. Mark and I had just met that year when he moved to the school. I had not realized how importantly the time I spent getting to know teachers before I began to work with them had contributed to our later ability to move directly into planning together. Mark and I missed this step. As a result, we missed out on the potential for the creation of a shared space.*

Following that single class period with Mark, I immediately began to back pedal. I felt my continued presence in Mark's room would be detrimental to our relationship. I worried if I continued to push my way into his safe space, I would ruin any future chances I might have to work with him again. I saw that creating a shared space needed to involve an invitation by the classroom teacher. Comfort and willingness to move through challenges were needed for trust to grow and exploration to flourish. I felt Mark had allowed me into his classroom only because he felt he had no option. Once I was in there, he seemed to feel threatened by my presence. Decisions that I made in our single class together did nothing but increase his anxiety.

Earlier, during our planning time, when we were talking about team-teaching, he

expressed confusion as to my role in his classroom. He seemed worried I would be evaluating his teaching. Despite my reassurances, when I entered his space that day, he still seemed very uncomfortable. I sensed I was interrupting a story he had already experienced prior to our attempted relationship. His knowledge of sharing a space with another adult seemed to be about discomfort and judgement. He seemed unable to release this prior experience and make room for a new one. Added to that experience was my decision to introduce the coloured cards without consulting him first. This seemed to confirm his belief that I was judging his teaching. When I brought the cards into his class it was as though I was asserting that what he was doing was not good enough.

I did not like how I felt either during the class or immediately afterward. I wanted to be wanted, and I was not. As a result, I sent him the following email:

I sense anxiety. My intent is not to create anxiety. It is to offer solutions to teaching conundrums we all have. I don't have all the answers. I don't judge people who don't have all the answers, because I am one of those people. However, I will explain why I wanted to work in your room and you can decide. This is for you, not me (although I do reap immense benefits). Therefore, whatever your needs are, I respect that. I was, personally, not happy with our planning session and that was because I sensed that I wasn't altogether helpful to you. We didn't have enough time. So, I thought that maybe by working alongside you, I could improve my contribution. The challenge is that I don't know you very well and you don't know me. That takes time. Anyway, I honestly do not want to be in your room if it makes you uncomfortable and I sense it does. So, instead, I can be a sounding board if you need it. And I apologize for not planning terribly well with you and for causing stress. I will share my two questions I

had after today and we can leave it at that. Thank you for allowing me into your room today.

Have fun with this unit. Take care.

Katie (personal communication, 2007)

Even as I examine that email now, I remember how disappointed I felt at having to let go. I mostly felt like I had let Mark down. He responded soon after, confirming his desire to keep his space a safe one but thanking me for my assistance. I have no real proof Mark did or did not receive benefit from our time together. In reality, because I am no longer on that school's landscape, I have no clear knowledge of the effect I had on any of my colleagues' practices. However, the voice of Mark that lingered in my head reminded me, long after his real voice became silent, that I had not done what I had set out to do. I realized that a new story cannot replace an old one without a process. I had no past experience with Mark and, as a result, we had nothing to build on. He had never seen me dance and I, in turn, had never watched him. We had no sense of how each other moved or what steps each knew. We had no way to honour each other's personal practical knowledge. We had not travelled on any part of our journeys together and therefore our places of knowing were vastly different. I was disappointed in myself for not seeing how important this was. I was disappointed I had assumed Mark would be willing to be my partner when this was not the case.

Mark was not the only partner with whom I failed to find a place of understanding and shared purpose, and this was hard for me. In the midst of these relationships, I felt my purpose fade. When I judged my work with these teachers according to the conduit vision, I was unable to claim success. When I listened to my own voice and my personal practical knowledge, I still felt unsuccessful. When I listened to the voice of the teachers who resisted my presence in their

classes and who even resented the message I was delivering, I felt I had betrayed them in some way. I could not determine who I should be in their classes or what I should do.

In particular, I recall my experience with another teacher near the end of my second year:

March 2, 2008

Work with Julia is similar [to work with Helen]. Either I am teaching, or she is. There is no team. I have kind of taken over what we had planned together. She does not have a clear vision of why she does what she does at all and I feel powerless to fix this because she does not seem enthusiastic and I know how sensitive she is. The kids did another writing response on Thursday and I asked her to use the rubric this time. She said she didn't know when she'd get to it. It just isn't progressing. I don't think she's learning anything. (personal journal, 2008)

In my time in Julia's class I struggled to become part of her safe space. Despite her invitation to work together, she did not choose to move past her cover stories. When I asked her questions or made suggestions, she avoided our relationship altogether. She chose to sit at the back of the room and let me instruct, assess, and develop the unit. I felt caught in the conduit, unable to shake my mandate to deliver the system story. She chose not to share her personal practical knowledge and I felt no choice but to listen to the voices of the students, my own voice, and the voice of the conduit. Complicating things further was acceptance by her students of the work I was doing. In her class, I was positioned against Julia and alongside her students and this ensured an uncomfortable situation. I may have changed the learning experience for the students, but Julia was no part of it. She became an observer and she handed her space over to me. This was the exact opposite of my intention. We never moved past this dynamic.

My time in Julia's classroom invited me to question whether or not everyone is willing to

be a partner in a dance. The conduit assumes all dancers are ready for partnership, but I found this not to be so. Julia was only willing to watch me dance or to dance by herself. A partnership was not a choice she made in our circumstances.

### **Dancing without passion**

*I always tell my students that we have to feel safe enough to take risks if we are to learn well. That goes for me as a learner as well. Sometimes those risks can cause controversy. Sometimes I make mistakes. Many teachers engage in a kind of self-censorship that limits the risk and the controversy, but that limits a lot of potential learning. (Cowhey, 2006, p. 194)*

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, “One place can position two people very differently” (p. 83). My time with Helen, while long, was filled with doubt and frustration. There were times when I felt we were working well together and the next day would be difficult. Sometimes I fit in and other times I only served to create more space between us. I believed that in order for our relationship to move into one of trust, I needed to share as much as she was going to share. However, we never seemed to be able to negotiate this sharing in a way that felt honest. I felt unable to share openly and she, in turn, struggled with this notion. Miller (2005) expanded on this idea, “...I feel as though I may reveal only segments of myself, pieces that function in isolation from one another” (p. 69). Helen and I seemed to be sharing pieces of ourselves and our experiences. We both held back some of our stories.

Furthermore, in Helen’s room, the students seemed to have difficulty being part of our shared space. Both Helen and her students had a vested interest in my presence and activity in their classroom, but it often felt like one interest was conflicting with the other. I felt I had to choose between Helen and her students, which created challenges we could not seem to

overcome. As a result, there always seemed to be one factor between Helen, the students, and me, which was out of place each day. A journal entry following one of our days together shows the challenges we were facing in creating a shared space:

January 15, 2008

Helen came up to me at lunch and said that her students were definitely “goofier” when I was in the room. She said she didn’t know why. I found that interesting and it bears further contemplation. I have a long history with these students. I know them well and have taught them more than once. I think there must be something to having a particular reality in a classroom and when even one element is changed, this can change the whole dynamic. (personal journal, 2008)

A journal entry from later in our time together shows how our difficulty continued:

March 2, 2008

Helen’s class is rough. We aren’t really team-teaching well. There is no easy flow to our work together. It is not like we are in it together. I hope it improves but so far, not so good in terms of the trust and fun I hope for. At least we planned the unit really solidly. She just hasn’t internalized why we planned what we did. She was unable, for example, to articulate why we were asking the students to make journals, even though it is our most important data piece. (personal journal, 2008)

We never really moved into a way of dancing together that did not feel forced. At some point in our time together, we seemed to discover conflicting stories of teaching and, as a result, we developed a cover story in order to manage our time. I wondered if she felt tangled up in our cover story of working together toward a shared goal. I wondered if she sensed the script we had developed around our team-teaching and if she felt content with it or disappointed. With Helen, I

seemed to be positioned as a conduit. As with Julia, Helen seemed reluctant to share her personal practical knowledge. She seemed to want to make changes because she felt she had no choice. I thought she wanted to journal with students for the same reasons I did. I thought she understood why we were doing it. However, we did not have a shared purpose. The space we inhabited was only shared in a physical sense. I imagined her relief when our final team-teaching day arrived. She conceded, in a discussion at the end of the period, that in the beginning she had not really understood why I was in her class. She stated things had improved, but I sensed great relief when I said my final farewell.

Our challenge and even failure at creating a shared space invited me to examine myself and my professional knowledge. Often, as I was working in her room, I would wonder why certain things that occurred in her class caused me discomfort. I questioned my own beliefs about teaching and who a teacher is in his or her safe space. I wondered who I was in my own safe space and who I was in Helen's space.

Tomlinson, Brimijoin and Narvaez (2008) had much to say about this process of change within schools. They spoke specifically about schools undertaking a change into differentiated practice. They called the sort of philosophical change I was attempting a "second-order change" and they asserted that this kind of change is "...complex, messy, uncertain, labor intensive, and long term" (p. 108). Those moments when I felt I was pushing beyond what my colleagues were comfortable with were necessary for second order change to occur, according to Tomlinson et al. They stated, "I've grown to appreciate how change in high schools requires a catalyst that absolutely interrupts business as usual" (p. 164). I began to question whether my role was to be the catalyst. According to the conduit message, this was clearly my role. I continued to wonder if there were moments when I was an effective catalyst and moments when I was not. Did the



stories my colleagues lived by position them to be open to change? Did I push Helen to “second order” change or did I just push her to adapt as well as she could while I was in the room? Was my role in Helen’s classroom about being a catalyst or was I simply temporarily interrupting the secret story she was living in her safe classroom space? Would I have had more success had I viewed her as a partner? Was the definition of my role as a catalyst misleading and did it cause more harm than good? On her final feedback form, when I asked the question of what she would like to work on next, her reply was, “???” (field text, March, 2008). Despite any learning I may have experienced, I sensed our work together was clearly finished and would not be occurring again.

### **When the dance falters**

As a person who was responsible for encouraging change, I continued to strive to respond to teacher differences as I would student differences. In Beth’s case, working together in a shared space was beneficial for both of us. I learned much about my own and Beth’s teaching style and I believe she felt relatively comfortable trying new things in a subject area where she had expertise. In the case of Julia, however, working together was not an option. She responded much more favourably in public spaces when I was delivering the conduit message. She seemed willing to listen to the information I was delivering and seemed more comfortable when she remained detached from the change process.

I sensed the assumption implicit in the conduit, that everyone was ready for change was not the case for all of my colleagues on my educational landscape. I tried to attend to these differences in teacher readiness even though this kind of difference was not acknowledged in the conduit. In the words of Hertberg and Brighton (2005), “Teachers who come to staff

development are as diverse as the students they teach. Professional developers need to respond to this diversity by differentiating their approach to staff development” (Hertberg & Brighton, 2005, p. 47). While I attempted to differentiate my work with teachers, I found it challenging when charged by the DI PLC to strive for consistency and to present the system story as “best practice.” I believed in a differentiated approach to learning but often felt unable to differentiate fully in my work with my colleagues.

Through my work with Mark, Helen, and Julia, I learned a great deal about my DI role and the work I was doing as part of that role. I learned that my DI partnerships were as complex and as varied as the people within them. The work I did depended on my partner. It depended on the knowledge each of us brought to our time together. It depended on our own stories and on the stories of DI and collaboration each of us held. I learned that the sacred story is always filtered through someone, and therefore it is changed every time. I learned that even though it is assumed in the conduit that the person receiving the message is neutral, this is far from the case. The work I was doing was human work and I was always entering a teacher’s story “in the midst” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In each instance, Mark’s, Helen’s, and Julia’s understanding of the role I was going to play in their classrooms was different from my own understanding. Their comfort with me was nowhere near developed enough to invite collaboration. My failure to recognize the importance of this made me feel I had failed all of us.

### **Hoping to find the dance**

My experiences with Mark, Helen, and Julia were lived out in opposition to the intent I held for my work. I viewed my role as one of supporter in the process of examining practice. Despite the complication that I was positioned as a “knower” according to the Project, I really

tried to present myself as a partner in inquiry into teaching practice. I wanted to nurture partnerships with my colleagues in which I could shed the sacred and system stories being passed through the conduit and focus on developing relationships. I asked questions, and listened to answers. Some teachers, in turn, began to ask questions of me and together we built our relationships despite the tension this created between how we lived our work together and the system story of “knower” and “learner.” I worked hard to reflect my acceptance of the teachers’ challenges and to avoid judging anyone for mistakes they may have made. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) clarified the importance of this acceptance in collegial work:

For me, collaboration is more ... it involves talk about beliefs, understandings, values...a shared language develops ... [it] involves sharing a purpose and finding support and understanding when issues and dilemmas arise. Respect, trust, and the preservation of individual integrity are also important aspects of collaboration. (p. 62)

I ultimately communicated my interest in finding shared pathways to successful learning, and a mutual interest in the students in their classroom. I worked hard to become part of the classroom environment by working with students as soon as I could, resisting sitting anywhere in the room for too long. I worried that if I sat, my colleagues would interpret my presence as evaluative, just as Mark had done. I helped prepare materials for our team-teaching and I became familiar with my colleagues’ chosen resources. Most importantly, I became familiar with their students as quickly as possible, thinking about and discussing student learning preferences and strengths with my colleagues. I felt a desire to shift the focus from teaching to learning as quickly as possible in order to move my colleague and me toward a shared purpose. I hoped this shift would move our relationship to one of partnership and away from one in which I was a leader of our dance. I hoped this shift would invite a greater equity between us. I felt a strong

desire to support my colleagues in ways they requested. Through experimentation, I strove to communicate a spirit of learning to both the teachers and the students. I made suggestions for altering instruction daily but consistently stated I did not have the answers and, in fact, some of my suggestions might not be successful for students. I tried to share my own learning at every opportunity. I questioned my own assumptions out loud and asked for feedback often. Despite my efforts to create spaces of trust and experimentation, my success on this front was not always guaranteed. Sometimes positioned as a DI Facilitator and teacher, we could not shake the dynamic of leader and follower.

### **Beginning a powerful dance**

Creating a shared space with even one teacher took much longer than I thought it would in my first year, especially since I was not sure what that meant in the beginning. The conduit dictated I needed to work inside classroom spaces, and I wanted the teachers who normally resided there to welcome me into their secret world. Somehow, deep within me, I knew this invitation was profoundly important—but I really did not know how it was going to happen.

I had been trying for a while. I had been working alongside a middle years teacher for weeks. I worked with half the class while she worked with the other half. Even though we were in a classroom together, teaching the same group of students, I felt we were not creating a shared space. We were not really working together. We were like two toddlers, playing side-by-side but not interacting or sharing toys. There was no crossing over of ideas and concerns. I could not really model strategies and behaviours and we could not really plan our approach together. It was not a true DI Project model and my impact on this teacher felt minimal, at best. I felt more like an assistant and less like a colleague.

### **Spotlight Moment: Dancing with Craig**

*When Craig approached me, I did not expect him to be the first teacher with whom I would co-construct a shared space. He was the senior history teacher in our school and had been there for about ten years—certainly longer than I had. He was very well known by the students for a couple of reasons. Firstly, in addition to teaching, he was also the soccer coach of our local competitive team. Secondly, he was known for his lecturing ability. Craig was one of those teachers who could verbally entertain for an hour period and deliver his content at the same time. This came in handy as the senior history teacher, where he could spend time weaving his stories and capturing the imaginations of his students. He also had a way of communicating with teenagers that resonated with me. He spoke with them, not at them, and his sense of humour enabled him to reach a good number of students. However, his teaching style was very different from my own and I worried about this difference. On top of that, I had imagined I would find success in the middle years first because that was where I had experience. Senior teaching was mostly foreign to me and I certainly could not imagine getting my head around the content or the abilities of students at that level.*

*Craig's concern, when he approached me, was a large research project and presentation he was about to start with his class. He felt past projects had been done poorly and he was interested in the DI perspective on research and how to get the best from students. I was relieved he asked about research strategies because this was one area where I actually felt I could offer some help. He listened to my suggestions and ideas and decided to offer students the choice of three methods for research. I then offered to help him prepare by cutting paper and organizing envelopes which would hold student data. Early on, he stated he would be most comfortable*

*doing the actual instruction. However, he said if I wanted to come in on research days to help students, then that would be fine. I was disappointed. I worried this arrangement would not lead to a shared space again but feeling I had no choice, I agreed.*

*After working the situation over in my mind, I decided to sit back a little and attempt to improvise my way into a more genuine team relationship with Craig. I hoped that modelling instructional practices would be a less directive approach to identifying possibilities for instruction. However, I felt I needed to team-teach with teachers if I was going to be able to demonstrate new approaches and, more importantly, model the reflective work that could follow each and every lesson. I also wanted to heed the request of Craig in order to develop a relationship of learning and respect. So I waited. I prepared all the materials and I waited to see what would happen when he delivered his first lesson.*

*In the back of my mind, I was hoping just one student would ask a question about the assignment and research methods that I would be requested to clarify. I was hoping once Craig and the students offered me a voice in the classroom, it would evolve into an invitation for me to become a genuine part of this classroom space.*

*It turned out I did not have to wait for long. On the first day, Craig took time to outline the project expectations and topics through handouts and an overhead. As the students flipped back and forth through the pages, you could see questions begin to form almost immediately. The project was a large one and student anxiety was almost palpable. They turned to whisper to each other and begin to mark out alliances that would get them through a project this size. They learned they would be presenting their research in partners and they ignored many instructions that followed, choosing instead to silently nod and gaze their way to the pairings they needed to clarify.*

*Before long, students began asking questions about citing references and how to paraphrase properly. Craig attempted to reassure them and clarify his expectations but it became clear very early on that the students would need some help with the processes of research and not just with the content. Neither of us fully realized it at the time, but this was a pivotal point in our relationship with each other and with the students.*

*In the silence of Craig's classroom at the end of the hour, after the students had streamed out, we talked about the clear anxiety expressed by the students when they were given the assignment. We made a crucial decision about the project. We agreed that instead of building a wall and watching the students either climb it or fall flat, we would help them over the wall. We agreed to structure the assignment with many smaller deadlines to assist students with managing their time. We also decided to teach students some of the skills they would need to be able to communicate their understanding of World War II. I could feel my excitement surge because I knew this was a big decision and we were making it together. I knew this was new for Craig and, as soon as he agreed to try something new, he was also agreeing to take the journey with me. I could feel the door to a shared space open just a fraction.*

*We moved forward in our plans to scaffold to ensure students' success with this project. It was clear a number of them did not know how to conduct research. Craig and I agreed that perhaps previous classes may not have produced the best essays because students did not have enough prior knowledge about how to research, how to turn research into writing, and had not been provided with exemplar essays to assist in their understanding of essay format and structure. We spent a good deal of time talking through this revelation and its significance for teachers in the senior end. I think this was an important moment for Craig and me in understanding how what we were doing was linked to student success in other classes.*

*We planned a lesson for the next day that would help students learn some prerequisite skills. Craig admitted he did not feel comfortable enough to deliver this lesson and asked me to do it instead. This was a watershed moment. I knew how big this risk was for him. It was a huge leap to invite me to do instructional work with his students instead of doing it himself.*

*The following day, I taught the lesson on paraphrasing and determining reliable sources. I knew how important it was to deliver the lesson with the same voice Craig had been using with his students. I spent more time than usual making sure the lesson would be very successful while, at the same time, making it like something Craig could easily do in the future.*

*Despite my careful planning, it was obvious the students saw this instruction as new, not only because it was delivered by me. In addition to their interest in my presence in the room, this instruction was new because they had never been taught how to paraphrase this explicitly. As they sat in the darkened room and looked at the overhead of information they were being asked to paraphrase, they were fully attentive and I could sense they recognized how this would impact their research. During my instruction, Craig found moments to explain the information we were reading more clearly and clarify how he saw this process relating to the project itself. We easily slipped into a rhythm of team-teaching that, to me, is one of the richest teaching experiences a person can have. I could see Craig relax almost immediately and I felt he had begun to sense our time together could be enjoyable. In that hour, we had created the beginning of a shared space.*

*Craig and I continued to teach together for the duration of the research unit. We faced some challenges during the process and had to admit to ourselves some shortcomings of current teaching practices at a senior level. As we explored the notion of education on a bigger scale, we spent time articulating our philosophies with each other. We also broke Craig's original*



*assignment into parts and looked at whether students were able to reach his expectations and how we could make his assignment manageable for all students.*

*It was not all smooth sailing between Craig and me. I faced times when I thought the project needed to go a different direction and when I felt we needed to offer more help to students. However, I held back on having these discussions because they did not emerge out of the work we were doing. I also continued to struggle with determining reasonable expectations for grade eleven students. There were moments in our unit when I realized we had not yet discovered everything we needed to know about learning in this context with this group of learners. I also sensed there were times when Craig was disappointed in aspects of our planning. He was not always convinced the changes we were making were giving the results he hoped.*

*When we were finished the unit, at my suggestion, we asked the students for written feedback about our approach. The feedback was mostly positive with some very valid suggestions for improvement. The students identified feelings of success with the research part of the project. They felt more able to paraphrase their sources and turn their research into writing. I was also relieved to see the students recognized some of the difficulties I still felt existed with the project. They stated they would have liked more help with preparing for and delivering their presentation and they still did not feel clear about citing sources and images. I felt relieved these comments came from the students. I felt when students were able to identify these challenges, it created an opportunity for discussion between Craig and me. Instead of me delivering criticism, I hoped Craig and I could try to solve these problems together.*

*Craig seemed irritable when we talked about the feedback. He focused on the not-so-positive comments and seemed angry with the students for making them. He also seemed*

*frustrated, still, by some of the projects he received. Even more so, he was disappointed in some of the presentations. I completely understood his difficulty in reading about and recognising some things that had not gone as well. I, too, saw that some of the presentations showed a lack of skill and a couple of students chose to ignore the research strategies and copy information word-for-word from sources. I imagined Craig felt we had offered the students so much more help and yet he could not understand how every student was not completely successful. He seemed to feel he had bent over backwards and resented their suggestions for further improvement. As a result of being the person who had initiated the feedback session, I was not completely sure Craig and I had ended our time together on a positive note. I imagined he was frustrated with me for opening the door to criticism. Nevertheless, when we talked, three weeks later, about his perceptions, he was more reflective and stated he had definitely started to think about his teaching in a completely different way.*

*The following year, Craig moved on to an elementary setting as an administrator. Out of the blue, he sent me an email one day that read:*

*I just wanted to pass on a thank-you for the impact that you had on my approach to teaching that obviously needed an overhaul. I say so after administering my first (Yes, I stuck to my old ways at the start of the year) pre-assessment, and how enlightening it was, not to mention the questions it has raised in myself regarding assessment, and what fair assessment is. For example, in Math, why should I be grading my students on Activity sheets aimed at helping them fine-tune a concept I am trying to get them to master when what my aim is, is to have them master it? HOW should scores on the activities count towards the mark? I really do not believe they should. Instead, the activities should act as indicators only.*

*Okay, I started to ramble there for a second, but seriously, the time/opportunity I had to work with you has had the biggest impact on me both in the classroom and in my perception of what "effective" teaching should look like, and I wanted to thank-you again. (personal communication, 2007)*

Truth be known, the impact went both ways. In working with Craig, I began to feel the magic of my position. By working with another teacher, I felt the effect on my own understanding of what teaching was and what it could be. I began to see how enjoyable it could be to share a space with another teacher; to share my concerns and my joy. I realized it was possible to talk about teaching and learning with another adult and to learn from doing so. I felt that perhaps my work could, indeed, influence the person with whom I was sharing a space and that their work could influence me. I began to understand more clearly how to support and challenge at the same time and feel good about doing so.

My time with Craig was quite early in my DI role. I was still struggling to understand the conduit message with its sacred and system stories. I was still working hard to differentiate instruction in my own safe classroom spaces and make DI practices part of my personal practical knowledge. I had no real understanding of how to create a shared space or how it should even look. Craig's own strong personal practical knowledge helped me to maintain a strong awareness of his needs and to respond to these needs. He questioned suggestions I made and wanted to be sure of the reasons behind the changes I was proposing. His frustration with his students at times challenged me to work alongside him to determine the reasons for the struggle some students experienced and the reasons for his frustration about that struggle. He helped me make my DI work in his class part of my own new personal practical knowledge. I learned many things in his

classroom about the nature of senior students and how they learn. I also learned about how to start to share a space and to challenge what happens in that space while still honouring the knowledge each person brings to planning and instruction. In my time in his class, the conduit voice receded slightly and Craig's voice moved forward. This was a crucial moment in my personal growth and in my understanding of my role as Facilitator.

When Craig and I both witnessed challenges for students in our shared space, the work we did to respond to those moments was collaborative work. In my time with Craig I began to develop strategies I would use later when I was the 'other adult' in other classrooms, once again sharing with colleagues both the joys and the frustrations of teaching. I had to learn how to be supportive and not judgmental. I had to learn when to jump in and when to back off. I had to learn how to ask sincere questions without communicating doubt. I had to become a better partner and a better teacher. I began to learn how to work with another person in the pursuit of enhanced student learning and have the end result be a deepened relationship both in our secret shared space and in public spaces. I learned, in this spotlight moment, what a shared space could feel like—and I was hooked.

### **Moving the dance into partnership**

*Insight, I believe, refers to the depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another. (Bateson, 1994, p. 14)*

When I reflect back to the two years of my DI position on my school landscape, I can recall several other times after my work with Craig, when I felt the dance of my DI role invited moments of partnership. My positioning with certain colleagues at particular times moved away from that of being individuals working side-by-side into that of partnership where we became

more effective together than we had been separately. I recognized these moments, often as they were happening. They were moments when students were actively engaged and their teacher and I were witness to their success. My colleague was comfortable with my presence in the room and had moved away from fear and into trust. When I recall these times, my heart actually soars with the joy of those moments. I felt a balance between my own knowledge about differentiated instruction and the knowledge both teachers and students brought to our shared time together. I felt all our knowledge became part of who we were in the shared space and who we wanted to become. Although shaped by it, my identity was not entirely imposed by the conduit in these moments. Instead, it was constructed with the people in the space. Who I was, was based on what I knew, who I wanted to be, and how others came to know me.

Perhaps one of the most effective characteristics of these moments, when I reflect back, was an intense focus on the learners in the classroom. When the teacher and I stopped talking about teaching, planning, or philosophy and simply focused on facilitating learning, our time together seemed to flow away from awkwardness and intensity and flow into a shared purpose. It seemed as though neither of us knew more than the other, was able to do more than the other, and more importantly, we both became part of the dance. It was no longer about one person leading and the other following. Instead, it was about the partnership—it was about the dance itself.

A journal entry from the spring of my second year documented this type of successful dance partnership:

February 6, 2008

I think the thing I appreciate so much about Carla is her willingness to ask questions, to clarify her understanding. It demonstrates contemplation and reflection,

which is so critical to changing one's practice. Today, she had two questions written down for me. Also, she is not into pretending she knows more about DI than she does. She is an absolute expert in her subject area and brings that knowledge, which I do not possess (I wrote the same pre-test as the kids and got 17.5/25). It is not stressful to be in her room at all. I thought it would be. It is funny how much you learn about a teacher from being present in their workspace...being situated on their landscape. Everything from their family photos, to the communication style with students, to their acceptance (or not) of another person in their space shows who they are. This is one of those classrooms where I like to be. The goal for both of us is to help the children succeed and that is it. Nothing more. (personal journal, 2008)

As with Craig, my successful partnering relationship with Carla was also a surprise. I had always sensed reluctance on her part to become involved in the Project and the team-teaching it would require. I, too, did not feel anxious to work with her. She seemed confident in her teaching and was a veteran member of the staff. She never approached me in the first year and a half of the Project and I, in turn, did not approach her. There always seemed to be a distance between us on our professional landscape.

Carla came to me late in my second year, and asked for help with her Math 20/21 split. I readily agreed, while inside, I was unsure of how to give her the help she felt she needed. By the time we began our work together, I had been a DI Facilitator for quite some time. I had a story of myself within this role. Furthermore, I imagined Carla also had a story of me and the work I was doing. We came into our time together with an opinion of what things could and would look like. I sensed Carla's hesitation to become part of the DI story through her reluctance to ask for assistance until later in my second year. I considered new ways to become part of her space and

decided, in the end, to position myself as a learner in order to attempt a kind of collaboration. I hoped this would position me further from the role of leader.

When we began to team-teach, I decided to write the pre-test and learn the math concepts alongside the students. I handed over the content portion of the teaching to Carla and, instead, invited us to meet the needs of all students by becoming a student myself. I asked questions to clarify my own learning, hoping that in the process, we would be meeting the needs of some students too. I worked through the assignments in an attempt to clarify assumptions Carla and I may have held about the prior knowledge of students. I articulated my own needs as a learner, either out loud during class time or privately to Carla. In acknowledging that my understanding of senior math was limited, I seemed to find a place in our shared space as a teacher-learner. Any piece of the system story I shared was within the context of my own learning. Collaboration, in this case, became much easier.

### **Listening to myself by listening to my partner**

*If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth; the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard.  
(Palmer, 1998, p. 151)*

While my desire to nurture a shared space with my colleagues was clear in my mind, there were certain challenges in sharing a classroom space wherein change was the ultimate goal. I frequently questioned whether my perceptions of teachers and what was happening in their classrooms were fair. I wondered whether I was making suggestions so teachers would become more like me or whether I was, in fact, responding to the teachers as individuals in their own right. It was a delicate balance and I was constantly aware of this tension. I consistently reminded myself to follow the dance requested by my partners in their classrooms. I could not be

the one who decided which dance we were doing and how it would be performed. Yet, at the same time, I was reminded of the sacred and system stories of the conduit—ones in which all teachers were positioned as equally able to receive the message of differentiated instruction and one in which I was positioned as able and ready to lead the process.

In my daily work, finding a place amid these tensions caused me a good deal of anxiety. While I felt the need to follow the lead of my teacher partners, the sacred story suggested I lead as the facilitator of change. As a result, I felt the dual pressure of listening to teacher voices and also listening to the voice of the conduit. In single class periods, I often caught myself fluctuating between working to construct knowledge with a teacher and imposing the knowledge of differentiated instruction.

In a collaborative partnership, two people dance together and each has a role. In this kind of professional framework, in contrast, the idea of who leads and who follows is not straightforward. As in an effective dance team, both members of the partnership know what moves to make and flawless teamwork emerges from the practice. To an outsider, it may appear that the male dancer leads, because that is how the dance is choreographed. However, the dancers know the truth: if the dance is going to be effective, each must know not only what he or she is doing, but what the other is doing as well.

Reaching this degree of collaboration in a shared setting is challenging. Collaboration cannot happen with a “dance teacher” teaching a “dance student” by dancing with him or her until they become a team. This was my challenge. I wanted to work with my colleagues in a collaborative way—I wanted to work in a partnership. This was difficult, however, because the conduit positioned me as a leader and my colleagues as followers. I was positioned as the person who knew the dance, while my partners were positioned as those who did not. The conduit story



made it almost impossible to be collaborative despite my real desire to do so. I struggled to find my place with teachers in their classrooms. I struggled to figure out who I was supposed to be.

I wanted to demonstrate respect and value for the moves of my colleagues in order to create a shared space of collaboration. I also wanted both of the personal practical knowledge we each held to be part of our work together. My difficulty was that I was trying to honour both my partners and myself while still attending to the sacred story of the conduit. This attention to so many voices was not easy. I strove for a balance between facilitating change and respecting the personal practical knowledge of my colleagues. Sometimes I struggled to hear the voices of my colleagues and I found myself wanting them to change more quickly and more extremely than they were able. Sometimes I got lost in the sacred story and where I was positioned by the conduit and I wanted different things from my colleagues than they wanted. When discussing the challenges associated with critical professional relationships, Schuck and Russell (2008) asserted, “It was far too easy to want Sandy to see exactly what I was seeing as an observer, and I quickly realized that being a good critical friend meant working with how Sandy was seeing her teaching...” (p. 116). Sometimes I saw teachers from where I was positioned and I wanted them to join me. I realized this desire to have them see what I was seeing was unrealistic and unfair. This left me with the question of what my purpose was in their classrooms. In order to nurture the trust I was working so hard to develop, I felt the need to pull back from what I was seeing and approach reflection times in a much more tentative way than I sometimes would have liked. Creating a shared space meant asking my colleagues about their perceptions in place of expressing my own.

As a way to invite the voices of teachers more explicitly into our work together, I frequently asked for their perceptions of the nature of our relationship and the work we were

doing. I continually gathered information as to how effectively we were communicating as a team. I listened to my colleagues and I watched them during our shared time together. I searched for signs that they were positioned to explore the conduit message I was delivering. I looked for indications we were a partnership as opposed to a leader and a follower. I was very sensitive to their responses to instructional changes we had made and to our discussions after our lessons. I watched how they responded to my suggestions for further change and to my offerings of support. I hoped to see signs of our movement away from a positioning determined by the conduit and into a collaborative partnership.

There were moments in our DI PLC when we seemed to recognize the importance of our colleagues' knowledge and experience to the success of our mandate. Members of the DI Project created a Feelings Rating Scale<sup>5</sup> to be filled out at least monthly to reflect teacher satisfaction with co-planning, team-teaching, and the DI philosophy in general. While there were many challenges with this feedback instrument (reluctance by teachers to fill it out, lack of understanding of who would be using the information, unclear questions, and expressed fear of hurting my feelings), the fact that we deemed teacher feelings to be important was reassuring to me. Unfortunately, this was the only formal feedback our PLC requested of teachers and, as a result, the feedback process of the DI PLC did not enhance the collaborative nature of my relationships with teachers to any great degree.

However, I did continue to hope that both the PLC feedback and the feedback I sought within shared spaces would provide me with some of the insight I felt I needed to move forward in my relationships with these and other teachers. I see now that the feedback portion of our dance together did not inform both partners, only me, and this supported the sacred story

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<sup>5</sup> This ten point rating scale was made up of ten questions relating to teacher perceptions about team-planning, team-teaching, and the DI philosophy in general.

structure of our hierarchical pairing. I did try to use the teachers' feedback as a way to hear about the parts of the work in which they felt really challenged and then to search for new ways to address and lessen the difficulty of those challenges in my work with others.

In their feedback, teachers expressed concern they would not be able to continue differentiated practices once I left their classes. As a result, as I worked with teachers, I struggled with the tension which existed between my provision of support and my impermanence in their classroom space. Our relationships were challenging to make collaborative when teachers worried about me leaving the room. Their confidence with and understanding of differentiated instruction seemed to be linked to my presence. In fact, the acceptance that I would eventually leave our shared space created disequilibrium in our relationship. Collaboration means working together and yet our collaboration was only intended to be temporary. Therefore, the shared space and the relationships we were developing would only be temporary too. This idea back-dropped our time together and the implications were complex.

Part of my shifting identity was tied to my need to be useful and helpful to teachers despite the fact that my place in their classrooms would be short-lived. Just as my adherence to the conduit message impacted my perception of my effectiveness early on, so did the opinions of teachers later in my work. I attempted to lay their voices alongside my own personal practical knowledge in order to increase my chances of meeting their needs. My desire to shed the conduit role of "knower" and invite the knowledge of the teachers with whom I worked into our limited time together was a large part of my quest for feedback. I equated my effectiveness with how well I was able to balance the tensions between honouring teacher knowledge and living the sacred story of a DI Facilitator. I strove to listen to all the voices around me.

At times, what I learned from the teachers' feedback was difficult information to receive and it necessitated a change in my beliefs and practices. For example, as with Mark, there were times when it was clear a teacher could not move past the belief that my ultimate role was to evaluate his or her teaching. This forced me to really examine how I approached teachers and what assumptions I held when doing so. It invited me to question to what degree some teachers were in a position to examine their own practice despite the sacred story's assertion that this was necessary. While I wanted to ask questions often, I also had to be prepared to face the answers I got, no matter what they were. I needed to be willing to hear the voices of teachers asking not to be involved in the DI Project. I needed to hear the voices of teachers telling me the dance we were trying to do was not quite right; not quite what they needed. I also needed to hear the voices of teachers who were excited by our work together and who felt safe in exploring their teaching practices. I needed to explore how the voices of feedback worked both with and against the voices in my own head—the voices of my identity, which determined my feelings of success or failure.

### **Changing the dance**

*No matter how many good ideas and best practices exist, I cannot 'stick them onto' teachers. Without keeping their experience central, I can get no foothold into their learning as teachers. (Rodgers, 2002, p. 232)*

How does a dancer know which dance steps to do? Does it depend on the music? Does it depend on their partner? Does it depend on the audience, if there is one? What invites dancers to learn to dance different dances? How does a dance change?

When I reflect back on the time I spent with Craig, Carla, and Beth, I can see how

wonderful shared spaces and shared dances can be. Once a trusting relationship is established and learning from experimentation and reflection occurs, I can see how valuable shared experiences are for everyone in this relationship. With Craig, I learned that one of the ways change begins is through deep discussions of philosophical beliefs about teaching and how the needs students have must be met in order to lead to their success. Creating a shared space where change could start to happen meant Craig had to invite me into his classroom. When he gave me permission to teach, he also gave me permission to be part of his dance. Following that decision, we discovered that, "...learning can link the rare moments of sudden understanding with gradual change through practice, the longitudinal epiphanies" (Bateson, 1994, p. 115).

My dances with Carla and Beth moved into the creation of shared spaces more quickly. I was further along in my DI experience and had learned much about how to balance the conduit message with my own knowledge and the knowledge of teachers and their students. Furthermore, Carla and Beth had a specific and intense desire for support with their classrooms. They opened the door to a shared experience quite quickly. In addition, they expressed positive feelings about our work early on, which helped to increase my own confidence and ability to take risks when working with them.

The process in Carla's room was likely also helped along by my decision to learn alongside the students. Purkey (2000) clarified the importance of this decision, "Teachers who recognize the limits of their power are more likely to try various ways of teaching. They conduct themselves in ways that remind students of their partnership in the teaching and learning process" (p. 61). I was attempting to communicate to both Carla and her students my acceptance of this partnership. I think this decision communicated a belief I had that she was the expert in her subject area and my role was to help students learn and not to tell her how to teach math.

At the same time I was working with Carla, I was also working with Helen, and these contrasting experiences gave me much opportunity to examine my role in each class and discover why I felt like a more competent teacher when I was with Carla. My identity was shaped by both dance partners and, I believe, the contrast of experience they provided helped shape how I saw myself in my role.

Unlike with Helen, the focus on student learning that Carla and I shared meant I was not spending time worrying about how to negotiate a strained relationship. I felt compassion for both Helen's and Carla's challenges and who they were within those challenges. With Carla, though, I felt I shared the challenges and I wanted to be part of the solutions. As Bateson (1994) wrote, "...compassion...its sensitivities depend on picking out one pattern from the mass and recognizing a kinship to it" (p. 51). I was able to recognize myself in Carla's questions. I was able to relate to her struggle to provide experiences that would be best for her students. Her dance was my dance.

In order to feel effective in my role, I needed to feel, at the end of our time together, that teachers felt encouraged by what we had discovered. I expected trials and challenges along the way. As Tomlinson, Brimijoin and Narvaez (2008) wrote, "... [leaders] know that change inevitably generates uncertainty, which in turn spawns tensions" (p. 185). I tried to balance this tension with happy discovery and celebration. My professional identity as a DI Facilitator rested in my ability to achieve this balance both for myself and for my colleagues. I felt I was successful with Craig, Carla, Melissa and Beth. I felt unsuccessful with Mark, Helen, and Julia. Either way, my attempts to find this balance resulted in shifts in my identity that reflected both the successes and the challenges I experienced. I searched to discover whether the work I was doing with teachers was about being a catalyst to change or whether it was about being a support

in the inevitable process of change. I wondered whether my role was to create partnerships or whether it was to lead a dance. Depending on my working relationships, my perspective shifted. I clearly saw that the DI Facilitator role could not be so easily defined, and, in turn, I resisted any simple definition.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Students: The interactive audience

*...the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. (Palmer, 1998, p. 11)*

I move up to the balcony of the Differentiated Instruction Project dance hall and I search the building below for the students. I can see a teacher partner and me dancing around on the floor. I can hear the music of the conduit playing, guiding us through the appropriate steps. Looking away from the dance floor, I finally spot the students sitting in chairs, watching their teacher and me move along on the dance floor. They seem interested, yet somewhat disconnected from the dance. From time to time they move onto the dance floor—but they dance with each other in groups around the periphery. They are never partnered with the teachers or me. They obviously do not control the music, and yet when I look closely, I can see their presence around the hall is impacting the dance between me and my partner. We have to move around them. In between dances, we stop and talk to them. They seem very interested in the dances we are doing but they show no signs of joining us.

I have no doubt the effect students had on the work I was doing as a DI Facilitator. They were so important in the decisions I made and even in how I saw myself as a teacher, that I initially considered them as third partners in my DI dance. However, when I really searched for them in my reflections, in my journals, and in my field texts, I realized they were not partners. My dance was not with them even though they were very significant in the shared spaces their teachers and I were creating. In fact, they were creating the shared space along with us. But they were not partners because they had no part in deciding which dance we would be doing or how it



would be done. When I realized this, I grieved, because I wanted them to be on that dance floor with us. I wanted them to be part of the shared work between the teachers and me.

I again considered where the students were in the dance hall and how they could influence shifts in my identity to such a degree when they were not partners in my DI dance. I imagined them in almost every aspect of the dance metaphor, looking for a fit. I saw that their role in my work was too large to position them as partners but too influential to position them as the dance itself. They were, in fact, the reason for the dance. They were the reason we were in that dance hall in the first place. They were the reason why the conduit played the music it did and why my partners and I worked so hard to learn the dance steps. However, they were also our audience. They watched, with interest, the dance their teacher and I were working on. Our dance shaped their learning and sometimes they became an interactive audience, offering opinions on the dance. Once I figured this out, I was able to consider the degree to which their voices shifted how I moved on that dance floor as a single dancer and as part of a partnership.

### **Changing the dancers by changing the dance**

*Of course, they did have moments of frustration and doubt, instances of head-shaking and adjustment, and times of celebration. (Tomlinson, Brimijoin & Narvaez, 2008, p. 161)*

Before I began my differentiated instruction position, I worked primarily in my own safe classroom spaces. My students and I had relationships that had a singular focus—I was there to facilitate their learning. Any choreography I planned was for the sole benefit of my students, and any feedback I received from them about our classroom work served to determine my own instruction. Through formal and informal feedback from them, I learned a great deal about my practice. When I attended to students, I found my teaching got better. There was a more

responsive relationship. I was able to shift my teaching to accommodate their learning needs. As a result, there was a certain intimacy that developed as we created our own story of teaching and learning together. This same intimacy is what makes all safe classroom spaces so powerful.

When I moved into shared spaces with my colleagues, my relationships with students shifted. Many of the students in my shared spaces were also students with whom I had shared safe spaces in the past. As a result, when I first entered classrooms as a DI Facilitator, the students seemed to take a step back from our previous relationship to examine, with interest, the new partnership I was developing with their classroom teacher. They often asked me what my role was in their rooms, a question I found difficult to answer. I was often unsure of how my relationships with my colleagues would develop, and thus I found myself unclear as to how to explain my role in this new context. They wondered whether it was my job to “fix” their teachers (transcript, October, 2007). They wondered what role I would be playing in their learning. If, in the past, they had been my students in my safe classroom space, they now seemed unsure of how to respond to me in this new role. They seemed aware I was different in this shared space with their teacher, but they were not sure what this would mean for our time together.

I think back to the day I visited Helen’s room, when a student’s simple statement about me in front of Helen invited me to explore the shifted position of students in a shared space as compared to a safe space. In that moment, I had a sense that how I felt when the student spoke to Helen about who I was in my safe space was important in figuring out who I would be in shared spaces. I lingered over that moment to discover how our positioning changes when a space changes. I sensed it was important to think about positioning in order to successfully nurture shared space for all its members.

In many cases, over time the students, their teacher and I worked hard to settle into our

places within our shared space. The challenge was in negotiating new relationships on top of old ones. The intimacy my students and I had developed in the past diminished. The secret story we had developed in our safe space no longer existed in our shared space. Furthermore, the story the students had developed with their classroom teacher was interrupted by my presence. The students' understanding of the role of their teacher shifted as did their understanding of who I was in this new space. My focus clearly shifted away from them and onto their teacher. Instead of the direct link between the students and me, there was now the presence of their classroom teacher in the mixture. This new shared space changed all of us—it changed our roles, our focus, and our positioning.

This change in who I was with students in their classes was challenging for me both to experience and to define. I struggled to understand the urgency I felt to hang onto my relationships with my students as they had been in our safe spaces. I understood that by hanging onto what had been, I was placing added pressure on the relationships I was trying to develop with my colleagues. Part of me recognized that I had to give up aspects of my relationships with my students in order to gain new intimacy in my relationships with teachers. Despite this knowledge, I continued to seek student feedback almost daily.

Contrasting my desire to welcome student voices into my DI world was my strong resistance to the action research project and its required link to student outcomes. I wanted students to remain as the focus of my work in schools, but at the same time I recognized that my DI role shifted my ability to easily do so. I knew very early on that the primary focus of my work was teachers. Certainly I wanted to improve student outcomes, but I recognized that this was not the dance I was doing. My dance was with teachers, and I resisted the mandate to measure my effectiveness by student growth as opposed to teacher growth. This tension between

trying to pull students closer to my work and inviting teachers to fill the space between the students and me never left my work. Throughout my two years in the Project, I worked to invite students' voices into my work whenever I could, while resisting formally placing those same voices in the position of determining my worth.

### **How should we dance together?**

Over two years, the dance of the Differentiated Instruction Project within my school was complex and involved many dancers. While the students were both the reason for and the audience of our DI dance, the partnerships between my colleagues and me moved into the spotlight and the students faded into the background.

This fading did not mean students were no longer important. Depending on the relationship I had with their teachers, the students became either the source of inspiration for our work or a factor that seemed to complicate it. I often depended on the students to respond favourably to changes their teachers and I made. When the changes we made in our instructional practices and assessment techniques were not yet enough to facilitate learning for each and every student, I depended on the students to inform us of their needs. When they offered feedback, it affected both their teacher and me, and more importantly, it shifted our partnership. As a result of this feedback my colleagues and I often reached deeply into our understanding of student learning. We turned to research we had read and things we had experienced to develop new strategies for addressing current concerns. As a result of this intensified work, my colleagues and I became connected more tightly through our shared purpose. Feedback provided by the students often invited a more complex and productive relationship between their teachers and me. Our time together developed into a deeper purpose than improving student learning. There were now

other things at play in the room. Student feedback also informed me of the degree to which their teacher and I were working well together and changing our teaching practices and philosophies. Their feedback served me differently as a DI Facilitator than it did as a teacher, which in turn changed how I attended to it. I looked to students to validate my role and the message I was delivering. However, they were not really the reason I was in their classroom. I was there to dance with their teacher.

My understanding of the role of students in the dance between their teacher and me shifted again on the day in Melissa's classroom when my principal, Marie, visited. In my reflections in the weeks that followed that single class period, I began to realize the important ways in which students were part of the dance between their teachers and me. They influenced movements in our dance that in turn impacted how we chose to dance together. Without them, our dance would not have been the same. In fact, it would not have existed. On that day in Melissa's math class, I realized the important role students played in my DI dance. I realized the ways they influenced the shared space their teacher and I were creating. Once the shared space was altered and new adults were involved, the trust and comfort we had created together no longer existed.

In retrospect, I realize I held many assumptions about students on that day, and my assumptions influenced how I reflected on their feedback in the weeks that followed. I had been depending on them to affirm the value of my work. They had done so in the secret shared space Melissa and I had developed in the weeks previous, and I assumed they would see the importance of sharing this positive response when Marie was in the room. I also assumed at that point that the sacred and system stories of the conduit were correct. I assumed the students would welcome the differentiated approach and I believed DI was good for all students, without

question. If things were not working, I assumed it was something their teacher or I were not doing correctly. I did not question the value of DI for learning. I also assumed the students' belief in it would be the same as my own. I thought if my experiences in their class seemed positive to me, student experiences would be interpreted the same way. At that time, I did not understand how students' positioning might result in knowledge different for them than from my own personal practical knowledge.

In thinking about the day of this spotlight moment, I realize the flaw in viewing the students as only living in the background of our shared space. They were the audience— but this did not mean they were removed from the dance. The dynamic of the shared space in Melissa's room was much more complex than that. I was dancing with Melissa, but the students were just as important to how the dance unfolded as were the two of us in the partnership. The students were part of the safe space we had created to nurture the dance. They felt a measure of comfort in the classroom, and they were part of the discoveries we were making. When I introduced a new adult into the space, I interrupted a story we were all living. Once the story was interrupted, the students no longer saw themselves as part of the dance. They were invited, instead, to step outside the dance and view it from a new position. This created tensions for everyone in the room that day.

### **Making the choice to listen**

*You'll take into consideration what we've said and see if you can change the way it's being taught and how...* (Kate, transcript, October, 2007)

From almost the very beginning of my work, I looked to student perceptions about learning, teaching, and differentiated instruction to guide my future decisions. In my action

research project in my first year, I had asked students how they felt about their classes, about learning, and about assessment. During my team-teaching time, I asked teachers to consider student perceptions of their learning experiences. I encouraged daily written feedback through exit cards<sup>6</sup> and journaling. I felt a compelling desire to listen to the voices of students.

Closely examining my initial reliance on student feedback to affirm the work I was doing reveals a tension I felt for most of my two years as a DI Facilitator. There were times when the voice of the conduit was overpowering. My desire to conform to the Project mandate and receive approval for doing so was so strong sometimes that I ignored my own voice. However, I also sensed things were more complicated than how they were being presented. The conduit asserted that teachers needed to be “fixed.” It asserted that students needed to “learn better.” Deep down, I knew my experiences on my school landscape were telling me that teacher and student voices needed to be heard. I knew teacher knowledge had to be given a place in my work with my colleagues. I knew my work was more than the message I was delivering. I also knew some teachers were not positioned to be willing to accept me as a partner in their rooms. There were times, therefore, when the message of the conduit and the message from teachers were in direct contrast. I felt caught in the middle, unsure of my role or even of what I knew about education.

In these moments of confusion, when I was unsure of whose voice to listen to, I often turned to the students. Part of me felt they, too, had knowledge. I hoped their voices would clarify my direction. I hoped they would steer me either to the conduit or to the teachers. Even more so, I hoped they would clarify for me who I was and how I should proceed. In the end,

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<sup>6</sup> Exit cards are cards given at the end of class, just prior to students leaving, to provide the opportunity for feedback about the day’s lesson, or to seek evidence of the degree to which students have learned curricular concepts in the intended way.

what they clarified for me was so much more than I anticipated. Before I learned from their messages, though, I needed to look further at why I wanted student feedback so badly.

### **Asking students to help us dance**

*First, students' attitudes about learning and about themselves as learners are of great importance in establishing, maintaining, and developing students' commitment to the learning process. (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 263)*

Looking deeply into my motivations for giving students such a strong voice, I realize it was about more than just listening in order to improve instruction or give me direction in my work. My reasons for asking for frequent feedback from students were complex, tangled up in my search for my identity as both a teacher and a DI Facilitator. Student voices were important in their relationship to the conduit, to teacher knowledge, to both my secret stories and shared classroom spaces, and to the notion of schooling as a whole. I looked to student voices to give strength to my conduit mandate, to affirm the work I was doing, and to reinforce my desire to invite students to speak from their perspective about the work I felt was necessary for change to occur. In addition to informing the work I was doing, student feedback provided me with a link to the students that I desperately wanted to maintain. Now that my focus was on their teachers, I longed to keep a connection to students' thoughts and perceptions. Perhaps this was my way of reconciling the loss I felt over my new positioning in their learning spaces.

In my first year as a DI Facilitator, I felt the pressure of being both a receiver and deliverer of the sacred and system stories from the conduit. I searched for ways to make the conduit message part of my own personal practical knowledge by experimenting with new teaching and assessment strategies in my own safe classroom spaces. In these spaces, I invited



students to help me discover what aspects of the DI philosophy showed promise and what aspects did not. I asked for honest opinions about the things I was trying and, together, we experienced many successes and disappointments. However, because I had framed our work together as experimentation, the students seemed to accept their role in helping me understand learning and offered me much valuable feedback. In my safe classroom space, the students' response was as important as my own. I was willing to try new things and release some of my tried-and-true methods in favour of enhancing differentiated instructional practices in my own classes.

Later, the students' voices added strength to my own voice when I began to work with teachers. The students had clarified aspects of the DI philosophy that resonated for them. They had shown an increase in understanding and depth of thinking in our safe classroom space. When I entered a relationship with another teacher, I was able to draw on student voices to give my voice and the conduit voice more authenticity. I felt this added strength to my position and the philosophy I was hoping to share.

I think back to an interview I held with four students for a research project I was asked to do for a graduate class. I chose to interview four highly able grade seven students who were part of a mathematics classroom in which I had been working as a DI Facilitator. These four students shared the characteristic of having met the objectives of the math unit before teaching to the rest of the class had been completed. In other words, these were students who would potentially profit from enriched experiences. I was curious to hear their impressions of learning in a classroom where their teacher and I were working to significantly change teaching strategies, philosophy, and practice.

When Sam, Kate, Lucas, and James<sup>7</sup> joined me for our focus group interview, they were clearly excited. I had taught them in my own safe classroom spaces in grade three French, science, and art. I had then gone on to be Sam's, Kate's and James' grade four teacher. When they were in grade six, I worked with their math teacher as a DI Facilitator. By the time I worked with them in grade seven math, and subsequently interviewed them for the graduate project, we were well familiar with each other, both personally and in a learning context. Many times previously, they had provided me with information that led to changes in my teaching practice, both in a DI setting and in my own classroom spaces.

My intention was to glean some insight into how they viewed learning in math prior to my arrival in their classroom space and then again after I had worked with their teacher. I wondered, for my own benefit, if they saw the changes we had made as beneficial. I was counting on them to support my role. I also wondered if there were things I could learn from them that I could discuss later with both with their teacher and with other teachers I would work with in the future. I was hoping they would echo parts of the message of the conduit.

In my hour-long discussion with them, I was astounded at the degree to which they recognized the changes we had made. They confirmed the effect my presence had had on the activities in our shared space. I found it interesting, however, that they did not recognize the degree to which they had internalized the curricular math concepts.

In the latter part of our discussion, the topic of expanding on mathematical understanding came up. The discussion began with Sam asserting she felt frustrated by learning multiple ways to solve a math problem. She felt, "...they're just filling your brains with all of this other stuff to get you messed up..." (transcript, October, 2007). Lucas reiterated her point by affirming that if he could solve the problem one way, he should not have to work through the logic behind his

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<sup>7</sup> All names have been changed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the students.

solutions. Throughout this extensive discussion, the students used proper math terminology and clearly understood the concepts their teacher and I had worked so hard to present.

By the time they finished talking, they were quite angry and showed resentment toward our expectations and approaches. However, I looked beyond their anger to the content of their discussion. I was amazed at the complexity of their descriptions of the math knowledge they had been “forced” to learn. I could not help but state:

Well, truth be known, as frustrating as it is for you guys that you had number lines and converting to decimals, as a teacher it kind of warms my heart to hear four kids talking about decimals and number lines which you would never have talked about before this unit because you wouldn't have spent enough time on it to remember. So while you might not have enjoyed it, you obviously learned it. (transcript, October, 2007)

Clearly, there were instances where learning surpassed perception of learning. These students equated learning with enjoyment, which raised a whole new set of questions for me about motivation, perception, and how to educate children. Lucas finished by saying, “This is really tricking us into learning” (transcript, October, 2007). However, James summed up my own perception of the work I did in classrooms every day. He replied to Lucas' comment, “It isn't really a trick. This is something that shows that we really are learning.”

This example illustrates the many ways student feedback met needs I had in my Facilitator role. The students were able to articulate what had gone right in their learning process, despite being angry about it. This encouraged my belief that the literature I had been reading and the DI I had been practicing had merit. Further, I was able to take aspects of our discussion and describe them to my colleagues in order to initiate professional conversations about learning and student perception of learning. Lastly, this interview prompted me to inquire

into the nature of learning for both students and their teachers. I wondered whether my role in the learning process for the students in a shared space was the same as the role I filled for teachers. I sensed that it was not, because I knew my role with students had shifted from what it had been in safe spaces. However, the DI philosophy may have had a similar impact on the students that it did on teachers—the questions raised by students were like those raised by teachers. I wondered if their reasons for resisting change were the same. This, in turn, invited me to reflect on the degree to which discomfort arising from the presentation of new ideas might be natural for everyone—students, teachers, and me.

Once I began work with teachers in their classes, I continued to seek feedback from students, to invite them to communicate a desire for a differentiated experience. I wanted them to tell their teacher and me how they felt things were going. I wanted them to clarify their learning and their experience in a DI setting. Particularly in the early stages of our team-teaching, I depended on students to deliver a message I was too hesitant to deliver myself. For example, I depended on students to show when they were having difficulty. I hoped they would ask for more choices, more clarification on certain expectations, and more say in their own learning. I hoped that by inviting students to share their opinions, it would illustrate a need to do so on a regular basis. I wanted teachers to see that asking students about how and if they learned was a very important part of teaching.

This motivation for asking for student feedback placed me in an interesting position within the teacher's and my shared space. In some ways, I was attempting to manipulate student feedback to communicate the conduit message, so it would not seem as though I was the conduit. In the beginning, I truly felt students would say what needed to be said without me having to be explicit, and that this in turn would protect the relationship I was working so hard to build with

their teacher. However, this proved to be much more complicated than I had thought. In the end, in addition to student feedback providing strength to my work, it was also the springboard for tremendous shifts in both my identity and my personal practical knowledge. There were instances, for example, when the feedback I received was not about the teachers with whom I was working, or about their practices. There were times when the feedback was specifically about me and choices I had promoted—and this feedback was not always positive.

I think back again to the interview I had with the four grade seven students. One aspect of our interview that caused me difficulty at the time was their assertion that ability grouping was the best method to address differences in learning needs and strengths. They frequently stated the need for out-of-class time to be spent by students who struggled with some of the concepts or who simply needed more time. Further, they referred to these differences often by using us/them language. They saw these differences as permanent, and expressed little sense of responsibility for being part of a solution in dealing with them. Instead, they advocated for one-on-one time outside of class as the only option besides ability grouping.

DI literature proposes many other solutions to this challenge, some of which their teacher and I explored in our time together. However, three of the four students strongly resented having to instruct or help other students. James identified some benefit to peer grouping, but also echoed a concern that the students with a higher *smarticle* (Sam, transcript, October, 2007) level would always be doing the majority of the work. Lucas especially resisted the idea of working with students who thought differently from him. Further, he resented being asked to complete steps to arrive at solutions and having to justify and explain his thought process. He felt that when he arrived at the answer, that should be enough.

In my time in the classroom, I had encouraged their teacher to try many flexible

groupings. Together, we designed problem-solving groups and mixed-ability pairings to encourage the sharing of knowledge. We had decided to pursue the new curriculum fully, by asking students to demonstrate their understanding of math concepts in multiple ways. Many of the strategies condemned by these four students were suggested by me. As a result of their feedback, I had to look more deeply at how these students were positioned on their landscape and what these changes meant for their own understanding of who they were and what their schooling was about. I started to examine how all my students were positioned in my various shared learning spaces, and I discovered some valuable insights which influenced my work the following year.

### **How well do students understand the dance?**

*In many respects, teaching and learning are matters of breaking through barriers—of expectation, of boredom, of predefinition. (Greene, 1995, p. 14)*

In the two years I was DI Facilitator, the feedback teachers and I received was intriguing in its variety and complexity. We rarely received consistent messages from the students we worked with. There was literally never a time when every student enthusiastically embraced all aspects of the differentiated instruction practices we attempted. This led me to question both the messages of the conduit and my own beliefs about differentiated instruction. I began to wonder if change involved more factors than I was aware of. This also led me to wonder if my colleagues' teacher knowledge should be foregrounded as a larger part of our work together because I, obviously, did not have all the answers.

Thinking about the feedback students offered took up a great deal of my reflection time as a DI Facilitator and as a researcher. I think back again to my work with Melissa in her math

class. I remember our discussions about how much more we thought students were engaged in learning. I remember how Melissa invited me back into one of her Chemistry classes the next year because she felt differentiated instruction had improved learning for students when we had worked together. I recall how optimistic we were about our upcoming work together.

However, this optimism, when placed alongside some of the student feedback we received, created tension for me about the work I did. In retrospect, I was not at all clear about the degree to which I had been a beneficial addition to Melissa's classes. While I know students learned content and most did well on the final summative assessments, some of their feedback gave me pause. The connection between learning and perception of learning still puzzled me.

Some of the positive written feedback I received reassured me that the work Melissa and I did was worthwhile. For example, students commented on their feedback forms at the end of the units of study that they had, "...liked when we got into group A, B, or C because we got to hear what other people thought" (field text, March, 2007). Some students also found it helpful when I would stop the class and ask their teachers to clarify a process again (field text, March, 2007). Many students enjoyed our flexible groupings because it "...helped each other out it made me understand better or in our group we wrote our notes together" (field text, October, 2007). Melissa's and my decision to share the assessment rubric at the beginning of the project was well received as was the research method we taught the students to use. As one student explained, "I found the envelope method helpful because it was organized. I usually just put all my different points on a paper and go from there but next time I think I will use this method instead. Yes, I can apply this process to any class" (field texts, October, 2007). Reading this feedback alone would have certainly confirmed the value of our efforts.

However, examining different feedback from the same two groups of students revealed

almost contrasting viewpoints. One student commented:

I found the group discussions were very useless for me for the reason that I did not get any help from the other members of my group regarding information. They all copied my research and questions because I found lots and they found the bare minimum. (field text, October, 2007)

Instead of finding benefit in sharing knowledge, this student resented the process and how it positioned her as a capable student who would have to share this capability with others. Another student echoed this same sentiment, “I didn’t like how they got to steal my questions” (field text, October, 2007). Some students felt our assessment practices were unfair and one commented, “I don’t, however, feel that we should be marked on what we accomplished in class as long as we get the assignment done. Some students work better on their own time” (field text, March, 2007). My contributions to class learning were also not appreciated by all students. One student said, “When we already knew something and Mrs. White started asking questions then telling us how to do it, when we already learned it, that got on my nerves” (field text, March, 2007). Some longed for the way their class had been. “[I learned] that I like normal learning better” and “[I learned] that I work better in the old teaching ways” (field text, March, 2007) were comments that made their preferences clear. This feedback clearly contrasted many positive comments we had received about the exact same experience in the same shared space.

When I examined these two sets of feedback, I realized student perception and student knowledge are complex things. I feel defensive, even now, in support of the decisions Melissa and I made about assessment, group work, and inviting deeper understanding. I felt relief that some students recognized the value in the rubric we were using. They welcomed the periodic group work and appreciated my frequent questions during class time. However, other students



did not see the benefit of group work. Instead, they felt they owned their knowledge and resented sharing it with other students. Furthermore, they were annoyed by my questions during lessons. Some students longed to return to board work, text work, and direct instruction.

Thinking about the students' varied feedback made me wonder if certain students were instinctively resistant to change, regardless of the gains they made at the end of the process. In particular, students I thought would benefit from enrichment were often frustrated by their first experiences with differentiated instruction. I think this was largely because they had learned to "work the system": they were very clear about how to get high marks, and they became comfortable with the procedure for doing so. As a result of their knowledge, they held a particular position in their classrooms. Their way of knowing was valued. It produced high marks, a privileged positioning, and success within the school system.

Their position of being the most knowing was no longer guaranteed in a differentiated classroom. As a result of DI all students were required, consistently, to be thinking. It was no longer acceptable for them to work just hard enough to get high marks. With DI, they had to work at a level that challenged them. Furthermore, many DI strategies invited them to share their knowledge with others. Learning became part of a group process, and knowledge was intended for everyone and not just a select few. Many of them seemed very uncomfortable with this interruption and how it impacted their position in their classroom space. Their discomfort invited me to mull the reasons for their feelings—why some students clung so firmly to what they knew, why their feelings seemed to express groundlessness in what we were doing. I sensed some students longed to return to their former position in their safe classroom space. I sensed their old position brought them comfort.

When I retreated back to my own safe space, I reflected on the effect of feedback on me,

and the decisions it provoked. Sometimes I felt irritated with the students. I resented what I felt was a lack of openness to new things. I wondered whether students really knew what was best for them in terms of learning. I questioned their knowledge. I felt their focus was primarily on themselves. When they asserted that “effective” learning was learning that was fun, I realized that their positioning could not provide them with the same knowledge as teachers, or the same concern for the community of the classroom.

Nevertheless, I tried to resist the urge to do what Bateson (1994) claimed is a common response to student feedback, “Much of the time, we are busy trying to talk children out of their perceptions, giving them the correct answers, the ones that are widely shared and fit neatly into familiar systems of interpretation” (p. 56). I sensed that the conduit was silencing their voices as much as it was those of their teachers. I thought about what the students meant by their comments. I looked for patterns in their responses and tried to consider how to alter my practice. Again, I assumed I must be doing something wrong. I had not yet considered that the conduit message may have been one-dimensional. I thought the situation was either-or. I believed I had to decide between my own knowledge or the students’ knowledge. I believed either the conduit was right or the teachers were right. In the beginning, I did not understand that all knowledge was important to my work, and that where people were positioned within their spaces impacted their knowledge and openness to new experiences. Instead, I spent reflection time trying to discount the negative feedback. I wanted all feedback to fit together neatly. I wanted it to reflect my own perceptions and the message of the conduit, even though they were not always aligned.

Later, during my research, I began to look back at all the feedback I received, and see that I was not going to get any simple answers from student or teacher feedback. Dealing with human beings was far too complicated for that. There were just too many variables. As Koro-

Ljungberg (2001) wrote, “I had to give up my desire to find common meanings” (p. 368). I had to be open to the notion that all knowledge has value and that change can be viewed more holistically. When I chose to turn to student voices in the hope of defining my identity and clarifying my work, I only discovered more questions. Not only did student feedback communicate different messages from teacher feedback but student feedback in and of itself illustrated a complexity of positioning. My desire to use student voices to find the “right answer” to who I was supposed to be in shared spaces was just not possible. I began to see how knowledge is constructed from many voices.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Listening to voices and finding my own

*Perception, attention, grace, all of these, varied or sustained, provide materials for constructing both self and world, and patterns for joining in the dance. (Bateson, 1994, p. 235)*

The dance hall is a place of stories. It is a place of people—of lives filled with hopes for the future and beliefs tangled in pieces of the past. The music and food, decorations and furniture become important through the people who use them. When we come to the hall, we hope to have our spirits lifted. We hope to find companionship amid a shared purpose in the dance. We hope that our mistakes are glossed over and our skills are celebrated. We hope to lose ourselves in the music and find ourselves in the dance. When we leave at the end of the night, we share our experiences with others through our stories. We connect with others who have visited other dance halls on other nights. Our stories become part of a larger story of the dance hall.

Standing on the balcony and examining the dance hall of the Differentiated Instruction Project has been a way to step back from the action and look for patterns within the larger landscape. As Greene (1995) clarified, “Because we have the capacity to configure what lies around us, we bring patterns and structures into existence in the landscape” (p. 73). This has helped me to see things which only exist in my peripheral vision when I am on the dance floor. By moving out of the dance, I have been able to tell and retell my spotlight moments so I can step back on the dance floor to dance again, in new and different ways. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, “To do things differently, we must learn to see things differently” (p. 215). Once I saw my spotlight moments as instructive, I was able to learn from them. By looking at myself from above, I was able to more clearly see how others were positioned around me. I was able to

see how they were changed by choices I made and how I, in turn, was changed by them. It is through this examination of the dance hall and all the people in it that I am coming to know myself.

### **Our positions on the dance floor**

*We do not have to completely understand their lives and choices: it is enough to trouble our own understanding and ways of thinking to challenge our conventional thinking. We should seek uncertainty and risk and get lost. We should question our practice and taken-for-granted definitions and open our mind to wider scenarios by not forgetting the past but by going beyond that. (Koro-Ljungberg, 2001, p. 377)*

The message of the conduit, which established a desire to improve student learning, was one with which I had no difficulty accepting. The authors of the literature on differentiated instruction, assessment, and curriculum planning presented hope and strategies for improved learning for students. In many instances, their knowledge became part of my own knowledge. I believe their vision has merit and practical application. However, I also believe there is more to the story of learning and teaching and change than the conduit imparts. The literature was only the beginning of my DI story. As MacLean (2003) wrote, “I could take other people’s ideas and notions, but I must use my own judgment to determine how or if they fit into my own personal and professional contexts” (p. 14). Their ideas were a starting point for the journey I began within my DI context. However, complexities outside the literature—inside classroom spaces, and inside me —shifted how the vision in the literature was lived out.

The facilitators of the DI Project also had a vision for how differentiated instruction would become part of all classrooms within the Division. They felt the differentiated model could address the interest they had in how classrooms could function and learning could be

addressed for all students. They decided that designing a Project which placed Facilitators within school settings would increase the likelihood of the DI philosophy becoming a reality. As a result, they designed the Project with the Facilitators positioned in particular ways both within the Division and within schools. This positioning, in turn, shifted how both our teaching colleagues and their students were positioned in the classrooms in which we worked.

When I look back to the dance hall, I see how mandated positioning impacted everything that occurred in the hall. In the end, everyone in the hall had a role, but not everyone was told what their role would be from the start. In fact, in the beginning, I am not sure anyone knew what all the roles would be. The only aspect of the DI dance hall that was initially designed was the role of the leaders of the dance and the music itself. As a Facilitator, I knew I was supposed to lead the dance and teach others the steps. I was given the music I was expected to follow and I was positioned on the dance floor opposite specific partners. However, I was learning the steps at the same time I was teaching them, and this caused a profound shift in my understanding of who I was and the work I was doing.

The messages of the conduit about differentiated instruction and about how the Project would work created a framework for the dancing that followed. However, I found the framework confined me in many ways. In the beginning, I thought the framework was the whole dance hall. I focused all my energy on hanging on to and understanding the conduit messages. I was unable to see how my partners, the audience, and the reason for the dance were just as vitally important in what happened within the hall. I judged my effectiveness as a Facilitator based on the music and my own movements and, over time, I learned this was not enough perspective to invite a fuller view of my work.

Within my own safe classroom spaces, I was able to focus on the music and on myself. I

soon expanded my view and invited the students to help me become better at dancing to the music. They began to develop a role in my work and I began to see how the reason for the dance was vitally important to the dance itself. The comfort I had felt for many years in my safe classroom spaces was altered when I began to really listen to student voices as part of my teaching. However, together, we were able to create an environment of trust and experimentation that carried us through our difficult work.

As I began to share classroom spaces with other teachers, I began to feel the real challenge of the position in which the conduit placed me. I began to see that the music was not enough to get everyone to dance with me. All the things I was sure would help me—my personal practical knowledge, feedback from my students, my hard-won familiarity with the music—was not enough to ensure every pairing with every teacher became a partnership. The partnerships developed only as a result of the relationships we created. I learned that trust was central to change and this trust extended to the students we taught. Without this trust, the weight of the implications of the conduit message was too much for everyone. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) wrote about the fears educators hold in taking risks, “But there is also the unease, not clearly articulated, dimly understood, that things will never be the same, that we will have to become new people, professionals with a different identity on a changed landscape” (p. 115). Without trust, the idea of this degree of change was paralysing.

Through my storied spotlight moments in my two years as a DI Facilitator on my school landscape, I was able to see that despite the force with which the sacred and system stories were imparted through the conduit, it was not enough to invite change. When I simply attended to the conduit voice, I was never completely successful. I came to understand that the conduit voice and its messages had felt so powerful to me that, in the beginning, I had been unable to hear any

other voices.

As my work progressed, the conduit came to mean many things to me. Through telling and retelling my spotlight moments, I came to personify the conduit in my mind. I came to see it as the messages, the messenger, the music, the choreography, and the voice of the system. It delivered important information about the theory of differentiated instruction and about how to work within my schools but it ignored my own and my colleagues' personal practical knowledge and our needs within a time of change.

Eventually, I came to see that the DI message which came down the conduit was only one voice of many surrounding me in my work. I saw how I was interrupting the stories of teachers and students being lived out in private classroom spaces and in public spaces, and how I was attempting to put a new story in its place, just as the conduit had inserted a new story into my storied life. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, "Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future" (p. 29). I learned how complex the notion of change really was, and I learned how important it was to attend to the many voices inside the change and the stories those voices told. Clandinin and Connelly clarified, for me, the importance of this realization, "The often cited resistance of teachers to change is, in our terms, a question of teacher identity and of the conditions under which stories to live by are sustained and new stories to live by are composed" (p. 100).

I began to wonder how I could co-construct with my colleagues new stories to live by. I recognized the importance of the stories they brought to our relationship. I saw how their identities impacted our work, and I saw how important they were to what I was trying to do. Purkey (2000) captured the important positioning of teachers when he wrote, "Although academic places, policies, programs, and processes all play important roles in student



achievement, it is the teacher who makes the critical difference in student success or failure” (Purkey, 2000, p. 56). If I continued to ignore my colleagues’ positioning in our relationship and in our shared spaces, I would be unable to fully support the change.

Just as I wanted to listen to the voices of my colleagues, so did I want to seek out the voices of our students. They, too, offered insight into the work we were doing. They were the reason for our dance and their opinions mattered. Nevertheless, I also discovered the complexity of this endeavour. Student voices said multiple things to me. Their positioning in their classroom spaces presented vast variety in their responses to differentiated instruction. Their voices, alone, could not give me all the information I was seeking.

The greatest possibility for understanding who I was came when I chose to layer one voice on top of another. Placing voices alongside each other gave me the greatest insight into my own identity and potential. I began to see how impossible change is when we fail to consider all the voices inside the change.

### **The whole dance: Seeing and seeing again**

*We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meanings of our past actions, anticipating the outcomes of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed. (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 160)*

There are times when I wonder how my DI job would have looked had I not been working on my thesis. I wonder how my fellow Facilitators worked through their anxieties and how they reconciled themselves to their own realities. I see how my inquiry prompted a degree of thinking about my work that had a vast impact on how I lived out my role. Greene (1995) wrote of the potential importance of this kind of thinking:

That is why I keep summoning up the experiences that gave me the moments of being and the ones that buried me in cotton wool, in the hope that I arouse others to couch some of their stories in similar ways. (Greene, 1995, p. 115)

The process of writing was a process of stepping onto the balcony of my DI dance hall and inviting others to step up there with me. It invited me to see a larger picture, to think about larger implications of the work I was doing, and to share my learning with others. By telling and retelling my spotlight stories, I was able to imagine new ways to live out my DI role. As Greene (1995) wrote, “It is by writing that I often manage to name alternatives and to open myself to possibilities” (p. 107).

It has been my hope that when I share my stories, others too will be drawn to tell and retell their own stories. I hope my story becomes part of a larger story of shared spaces and of change. While I have attempted to step away from the dance and view how others are positioned on my landscape, I know my knowledge is only partial. Kooy and de Freitas (2007) shared this belief when they wrote, “Like the stories, the analysis of the stories is also steeped in perspective” (p. 869). No matter where I am positioned I am still within my own story, and my understanding of it rests centrally on my perspective. By sharing my spotlight moments with those who hold an interest in my inquiry, we can begin to imagine a new way of working together in education. Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) shared this same hope when they recognized, “...how important resonance with readers is as a way of illuminating new ways of thinking about experience” (p. 33). With resonance, my inquiry is powerful.

I do not claim to have discovered all the answers. I do not assert I found a balance between all the voices vying for my attention, or that my own voice emerged with certain clarity. Greene (1995) wrote, “The search must be ongoing; the end can never be quite known” (p. 15). I

have not stopped thinking about my experience in my two years on my educational landscape. The work I did then continues to influence the work I do now. By taking time to stand on the balcony, I thought about the changes I was experiencing. From that distance, I was able to see shifts in my identity and to ask myself whether or not I liked who I was becoming. Bateson (1994) attested to the same experience, “Each return over the same ground represented layers of change; in me, in my manuscript, in the landscape” (p. 29). Like her, I was able to imagine new ways to live my story. I was able to see how I wanted things to be. Dewey (1938) wrote of the importance of this imagining, “...that this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning” (p. 74). This has been the gift of writing.

### **Imagining a new way of dancing together**

*The straining and the imagining ought to be part of the dance of life... (Greene, 1995, p. 71)*

I now stand on a different balcony in a different dance hall. My time on that educational landscape has passed and I have moved on to new challenges in a new role. My work as a DI Facilitator in my middle and secondary school continues to inform the work I do now, as a principal. I have not moved away from change. I have not abandoned hope for schooling. Instead, I have embraced the notion of exploring ways to shape the stories we live and tell in our schools.

I continue to look backward to my discoveries as a DI Facilitator. I continue to tell and retell the stories of safe spaces and shared spaces. I think about all spaces within a school and I see how necessary they may be for both teachers and their students. I think about teacher and

student knowledge and how it shifts how people respond to new ideas. I wonder whether the conduit must always be the player of the music. I wonder how our Project would have functioned without a conduit at all. Would we have embraced the idea of creating our own vision? Would we have known where to go? And how would we have been positioned differently, had we not had someone to tell us where to stand, how to dance, and what music to dance to?

I look forward to my new school and my new role. I think about how to honour the stories of the teachers and students on my new landscape. I understand that, as a new leader, I am interrupting a story they have been telling for some time. I wonder how to make this interruption welcome. I wonder how I will fit into new shared spaces. Greene (1995) wrote of the need to think about many voices within a space, “All we can do, I believe, is cultivate multiple ways of seeing and multiple dialogues in a world where nothing stays the same” (Greene, 1995, p. 16). In my new school, I will stay awake to inviting many voices into my story.

I continue to believe many of the ideas inherent in differentiated instruction are sound practices. At the same time, I understand there are tensions in schooling and its adherence to the conduit that invite exploration. I think these tensions will make learning for teachers and students more complex. Looking backward, I know that when I entered a classroom space as a DI Facilitator, I became another piece of a very complex puzzle. I did not provide solutions. I simply invited more questions. The students did not want to be fixed and neither did their teachers. I still wonder how, if I had not been positioned as a “knower” by the conduit, things would have been different. I wonder if, in the end, the collaboration between the teachers and me would have been more authentic.

I look inward at myself and I think about the changes I experienced in those two years. I changed the way I thought about teaching and learning. I changed how I imagined team-teaching. I learned how fragile and yet important spaces are to me. I learned how much I care about acceptance and how hard I was willing to work to get it. I learned how important trust is in times of change and how relationships are the foundation of any team effort. I learned that the conduit message was only a framework onto which I could place experience. Mostly I learned that change is about more than the message. Change is about people. Change is about voices.

As I move forward on my new landscape, I am open to experiences and what they will teach me. I have learned that my knowledge will never be complete. It will always be constructed from new experiences with people around me. Knowledge is fluid—its shape is always changing. Dewey (1938) wrote, “The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning” (p. 48). My desire remains strong.

### **Me: A dance hall revisited**

*...think of persons in process, in pursuit of themselves and, it is to be hoped, of possibilities for themselves. (Greene, 1995, p. 41)*

I return to the balcony one last time. I see that there is work yet to be done if future dances in future dance halls are going to honour all dancers. I imagine future inquiries that will examine how others are shifted by entering safe spaces in the midst of stories, and attempting to change those stories. I imagine an exploration of what it means to introduce initiatives into educational landscapes and have those initiatives become part of teachers’ personal practical knowledge. I imagine a time when we will look again at what it means to be positioned on our landscapes by others and what it means to find our own positions. I wonder what we will

discover about the importance of trust and readiness within a change process. I hope that I will see a time when we acknowledge the importance of all the voices in any given moment. I hope we will learn from our mistakes and assumptions, and see our situations for the humanity they present.

Glancing one last time onto the dance floor, I recognize myself—and I am astounded by the person I have become. I think back to the teacher I was three years ago and I see how my journey has changed me. My partners are always new and each dance is different—but what remains constant is me, under the spotlight, learning.

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